アリソン II

真昼の夜の夢

時雨沢恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION
KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

電撃文庫

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Design by Yoshihiko Kanabe

カー・ベネディクト

二十四歳。ベゼル・イルトア王国連合（西側）空軍最年少の少佐、腕のいい戦闘機乗り。“歴史的発見の英雄”であり世界一の有名人。女性に大人気だが、本人は非常に不満。ちなみにカーが名字。

アリソン・ウィッティングトン

十七歳。ロクシアーヌク連邦（東側）空軍伍長、飛行機移送部隊所属の飛行士。金髪碧眼。健康かつ身体能力抜群だが寝起き悪し。行動は一見無茶無謀。八歳で父親を戦争で亡くし、孤児院に引き取られてヴィルと出会った。

ヴィルヘルム・シュルツ

十七歳。東側のラプトア共和国、ロウ・スネイアム記念上級学校五年生。のんびり屋で成績は優秀。三歳の時、親によって孤児院に捨てられた。その五年後以来、アリソンの幼なじみにして子分――もとい、信頼できる部下、もしくは。

Wilhelm Schultz: 17 years old. A fifth-year student at Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School in the Republic of Raputoa on the east side of the river. Wil is a laid-back student with an excellent academic record, who was abandoned at an orphanage at the age of three. Since the age of eight, he has been Allison's friend, underling, trustworthy subordinate, and maybe even her—

Allison Whittington: 17 years old. A staff sergeant in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. She is part of an aircraft transportation unit. Allison has blond hair and blue eyes, and is extremely athletic. However, she is not a morning person. Allison often acts without thinking. She lost her father in battle when she was eight years old, at which point she was brought to the orphanage where she met Wil.

Carr Benedict: 24 years old. The youngest major in the history of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is known as a hero who made a historic discovery. Benedict is extremely popular with women, but he is less than pleased with his newfound stardom. 'Carr' is his family name.

When the great shadow passed over the sky,
Day returned to night.
Light returned to the room.

And there,
I met me.
'I' looked so very sad.
'I' looked so very kind.

'I' knew everything.
'I' left everything to me.

But,
All this time, I did not understand.
All this time, it was a mystery.

I was a child.
I grew into an adult.

But all this time, I did not understand.
All this time, it was a mystery.

Until one day,
When a man known as a hero came to us.
I had no interest in heroes.

But that man
Brought with him the final piece of the puzzle.

Who am I?
Where did I come from?
Where must I go now?

I…
All alone, I…

Chapter 1: Letters and Conversations

Dear Mr. Wilhelm Schultz,

How are you, Wil? It has been a long time since I last wrote to you.

It has gotten much colder recently. Are you healthy? I always worry that you might kick away your blankets in your sleep and end up catching cold. As usual, there is no need for you to worry about my health, at the very least. Mostly thanks to my sleeping bag.

I am currently writing this letter from a certain base in a certain country in the Roxcheanuk Confederation. As usual, the precise location is a military secret and cannot be revealed. I am not trying to hide anything—after all, I just wrote that I am keeping this secret.

You might think this is strange, Wil, but as usual, I am writing to you in a very formal way. I remember you asked me about it once, so I will explain. In the past, Grandmother Mut would often tell me that I spoke too coarsely, and that I should take care when writing because letters can remain forever. This is a sort of habit of mine, or a personal rule I try to keep.

Also, I always try to do everything Grandmother told me to do (do you have a very dubious look on your face as you read this, I wonder?).

In any event, the biggest news is, naturally, the signing of the peace treaty. The war between the Roxcheanuk Confederation and the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa is finally officially over.

I am writing this to you today, on the day after the signing of the treaty. All flights were grounded yesterday, and every soldier was forced to listen to the radio broadcast of the ceremony. The hangar was packed like a tin of sardines. I was very glad it was autumn.

The ceremony itself, which took place on the Lutoni River, was boring. Neither our president nor their king or prime minister took part—it was just one long speech after another from the ambassadors and generals. There were some people on the base (mostly from the army) who fought in the Great War when they were young, and they were glaring daggers at the speakers to the end. So I could not bring myself to doze off during the broadcast.

After the ceremony, everyone on the base had a moment of silence for those who died in battle(including my beloved father… although I do not even remember his face now) before being dismissed.

Yesterday must have been a historic day, but to be perfectly honest it did not move me very much. Although I do acknowledge that it is not a bad thing for the two sides to finally make up and move on past their past hostilities.

Last night, I heard someone from the army ask, ‘I wonder what’s going to happen to us now?’. I wanted to ask that question myself. It is inevitable

that the defense budget will be slashed starting from the year after next, but rumors say that the biggest cuts will happen to the air force, which was only founded six year ago and is(considered by many to be) the biggest strain on the military's resources. I do not want to think about it, but the members of my unit and I may soon face unemployment. Although I cannot be certain until the time comes… I suppose this might be a bit depressing to read when the war has just ended.

Oh, I heard an interesting story from an elderly army sergeant. Apparently members of the special forces are placing bets on the animals on their tags. They claim that the one I have now is an eel. Although I cannot be sure if that is correct.

I hope school is going well for you, Wil. Although I am not worried in the least. Please use your grades to crush those uppity heirs and heiresses who fill the secondary school.

I will end this letter here. I will write to you again soon. Because of my responsibilities in transporting aeroplanes, I do not know where I will be next time. Please send your next letter to my unit without an address, as usual.

Staff Sergeant Allison Whittington

P.S. This might be a late question, but have you decided on how you will spend your winter break? I am not sure how my schedule will be at that time…

* * *

Dear Allison,

Hey there.

I'm doing just fine. I haven't caught a cold or anything. Things have gotten chilly here in Raputoa, too. They've started to serve stew at the cafeteria more often now. Sometimes during the winter, they'll serve it every day. Although I don't really mind, since I love stew.

They might start heating the dormitories soon. Everyone's placing bets on the date—it's practically an annual tradition here.

What do we wager? The apples we get with dinner. The people who win can eat their own apple, then take the rest to their room to eat as a midnight snack. There's even a rumor that so many people tossed apple cores out the windows that we once had an apple tree sprouting on the flower bed, and that the matron got so angry that she chopped it down.

Anyway, I finally understand why your letters are always so formal. For your information, I didn't make a dubious face when I read what you wrote.

Do you know what Grandma told me to do? 'Don't ever take your eyes off Allison, Wil. And if you ever spot her blue eyes sparkling excitably, you must call one of the adults'. Although I never really had the opportunity to do that…

We had the day off from classes on the day of the peace treaty. They didn't force us to, but I went to school anyway and listened to the radio broadcast in the auditorium with the teachers.

It definitely was a historic day. It's like a line dividing one era from the next. Neither side won or lost. The border's still the same as before. But it definitely was an important moment in history.

One of our teachers fought on the Lutoni River thirty-five years ago. He told us that the ship he was on was sunk, and that he nearly drowned. He said he lost many friends in that sinking. He told us, 'the world is better off without war. You'll be happier from now on'. I understand what he means. I don't think anyone would want to find themselves having to choose between life and death, or killing and being killed.

At the same time, I felt sort of strange. The war between Roxche and Sou Be-Il ruined so many lives and killed so many people. But at the same time, the war was the reason Grandma crossed over to Roxche for her beliefs. And it was thanks to her and the people who helped her found the Future House that I received her care.

I'm here—going to school, having met you, Allison, and having gone through those three amazing days—thanks to all that.

The war ruined so many lives, but people like me ended up better off thanks to the war. I just don't know. What makes the world happy and what makes the world unhappy?

This might sound kind of contrary, but it's definitely a good thing that the chances of war have been reduced to nearly zero(the teacher I just wrote about says that the chances are never completely zero, and that we should always be cautious). I want to be happy about it without having reservations.

And about the mural that changed everything—I bought a photograph of it at the store recently. It's really beautiful, no matter how many times I look at it. I'll never forget the person who protected it—and the fact that I've seen it, so to speak.

I understand why soldiers like you must be worried about your careers. On the news four days ago, they were talking about ending Roxche's conscription laws. Some of the teachers here were worried—without conscription, fewer students will go to university to delay their military service, which might make students lazier.

But anyway, they've stopped teaching us that Cross-River is evil now. They've even blacked out inappropriate parts of the textbooks. The younger students are completely befuddled.

I'm sure many things will change even faster now. I really don't know what will happen to us from now on.

But still, I'm very happy to be alive like this, here and now.

Also, I noticed in the newspaper—Major Carr Benedict, the hero who found the murals, attended the ceremony, too. He was wearing this heavy dress uniform and a really annoyed face, sitting in between all the important people. I hope he doesn't blame the people who put him in that seat.

About winter break—I'm probably going to stay at the dorms this year. I'll stay for the new year, too—Raputoa doesn't celebrate it, you know. The new batch of first-years are going to arrive at the dorms on the fourth of the first month, and then we'll all be busy running orientation meetings and welcoming parties. The new school term starts on the eighth. I'll finally start my final year.

I'm staying behind this year because my friend who usually invites me to his place during the breaks is going on a study trip. They do this every year—about twenty students(and some teachers acting as chaperones) tour historic cities for several days. It sounds great, but it's actually a makeup course for students who don't have enough credits.

If you hand in a research paper after coming back from the trip, they give you a credit. But it's pretty expensive, since you have to pay for the course on top of the fees for the trip itself.

My friend decided to go on the trip(actually, he sounded so relaxed even though his credits weren't looking good that I had to tell him to go), so I'm just going to stay behind.

Apparently they're going to the Kingdom of Iks this year. It's the first time our school's going there. You know where it is, right? The country on the Central Mountain Range, southwest of the Republic of Raputoa. When I first heard they were going to Iks, I really wanted to go along. But my scholarship won't cover the travel expenses. It's a little disappointing, but I've decided to wait for next year.

Write back once you have your schedule, Allison. You can probably stay at the dorms. Although I' pretty sure the matron remembers you, so she might give you a bit of a scolding.

I'll write again.

Wilhelm Schultz

* * *

Dear Wil,

What is the itinerary for the trip to Iks? Please give me as many details as you can. And the names of the cities they will be visiting, if possible. Please reply as soon as you can. And for your information, I am sending this postcard from a completely different place from where I bought it.

Allison

P.S. You are one of those people too, Wil! Before you forget, be proud of yourself!

* * *

Dear Allison,

Did you buy the postcard near the Casna Coast? It's beautiful—I stuck it onto my desk. I'd like to visit it sometime. I've always wanted to see the lands they reclaimed from the sea.

Anyway, your unit is really flying all over Roxche, isn't it? I guess this is obvious, but I'm really amazed. And a little jealous.

This is the itinerary for the study trip. They don't have all the details hammered out yet, but they have the cities all lined up.

Days leading up to the trip: Orientation and shopping for supplies.
The 19th: Depart from dorms in the morning and take a train to the city of Elitesa at the southernmost tip of Raputoa. Spend the night in Elitesa.
The 20th: Enter the Kingdom of Iks by bus and head to the town of Mushke in the north side of the country.
The 21st: Tour Mushke.
The 22nd: Tour Mushke.
The 23rd: Head to the capital city of Kunst.
The 24th: Tour Kunst.
The 25th: Take a bus to Elitesa from Kunst. Spend the night at Elitesa.
The 26th: Dismissal at Elitesa. Students who live nearby can go directly back to their homes.

Classes end on the 10th. Then we have a goodbye party and a graduation ceremony for the sixth-years. On the 15th we have a end-of-year cleaning day, and afterwards the dorms will be completely empty. You'll be able to stay at the visitors' rooms anytime after that. But Raputoa can be pretty cold, too—

bundle up before you come. Are you going to arrive by aeroplane this time too?

Wilhelm Schultz

* * *

Dear Mr. Wilhelm Schultz,

Go!

You might be confused because this letter began with a one-word command, but go! Go on that study trip! You *have* to participate, Wil! Make sure you do!

My schedule is completely packed during your winter break, so I cannot come visit you at the school. Then you would be left all alone at the dorms! So I think it will be much better for you to go on the study trip with your friend to a country you have always wanted to visit.

Your only problem is money, right? Since the credit cost is covered by your scholarship, you only have to worry about the travel costs. I'll cover it. So please, go!

Please do not get the wrong idea. This is not charity, Wil. I am only lending you this money. You can pay me back once you finish university and find a job. You are going to graduate next year, Wil. This is your one and only chance to go on this trip.

I do not mean to brag, but I have quite a bit of money saved up from working in the air force. It is only that I have no time to spend it, as I am constantly flying from one place to another.

Is it not too late? If you can, sign up for the trip now. And please send me a telegram with the amount of money you need. You can send the telegram to the Air Force Command Center in the capital, addressed to my name, rank (still a staff sergeant, for your information), and unit name. Please just send me the number of the amount. I will send you a postal order by express delivery. And please do not hold back! I can also cover any other fees, like spending money you might need or money for books and travel supplies.

Go! Act now! I will be waiting for your response.

Allison Whittington

P.S. Is the itinerary set in stone at this point? If there are any changes, please let me know immediately.

* * *

Dear Allison,

First off, thank you so much.

The postal order came in this morning. I took it straight to the school office and paid for the trip. I'm officially part of the study trip now.

Actually, the registration deadline was about three days ago. But luckily enough, one of the fourth-years had to cancel on the trip, so the teachers were happy to have me join. My friend was ecstatic too, since he won't have to share a room with a teacher. Although I haven't told him anything about the money.

Again, thank you so much, Allison. It can't have been an easy decision to lend me so much money. I hope you won't be strapped for cash because you helped me out this time.

I'll never forget what you did for me. I promise I'll pay you back, no matter what. So please wait until I start earning money.

"Allison? C'mon, it's chow time. Allison? Allis? Hello? Alli-ling?"

"There you are. Ah, you're reading a letter from your boyfriend. Sorry to bother you, Allison."

"What? I really like this new nickname. 'Alli-ling' sounds so cute. Anyway, FYI. The cooks worked so hard that we're gonna get to eat early. Hurry on over or there won't be anything left. That is all. Take your time reading!"

And the itinerary hasn't changed. We'll be departing on schedule. There's less than two months left now. I'm already looking forward to it.

I'll write back again.

Wilhelm Schultz

* * *

Dear Mr. Wilhelm Schultz,

It has gotten cold recently, hasn't it? Have they started heating the dormitories yet? Have you won any apples?

I am glad that you made it in time for the registration. And please do not worry about me. I have no time at all to spend my money, what with work and all. And if I really need help, I can always borrow money from a co-worker.

And please do not rush; take your time paying me back. And do *not* go looking for a job straight out of secondary school just to pay me back. You have to go to a university, Wil. I am sure that is what Grandma would want as well.

Times like this always remind me that it is better to have money than not. If the 'treasure' we found that day was actually gold and silver, I think I would have used it all to put you through school. Then you would have finished secondary school and taken the entrance exam for Confederation Capital University many times over by now. And you could have found yourself an apartment there, too. What we found was a treasure in and of itself, but sometimes I still wonder.

"Wil! Zoning out again? C'mon, it's dinnertime. They're serving stew again."

"Ah. Reading a letter, huh. From that cool pilot?"

"All right, all right. I'll save you a seat and grab your dinner too, so take your time reading."

If you ever hear a similar rumor again, let's go search together! Leave the aeroplane acquisition to me.

Anyway, your trip is only a month away. Please take care of yourself. I hope you do not get so excited that you end up waking up on the day of the trip with a fever.

Allison Whittington

P.S. I received a pay raise last month, just as scheduled! I was afraid I wouldn't get one this year, you see. I am very happy. Please do not worry about me.

* * *

The 20th day of the final month of the year 3287 of the World Calendar.

"I get it. So that's how you ended up joining last-minute."

"I don't know how I'm going to thank Allison for all this."

They were inside a moving bus.

It was a rather large bus, with the engine sticking out from the front of the vehicle like a snout. There were eight rows of seats behind the driver's seat, with an aisle in the middle

dividing each pair of seats. At the very back was an area reserved for luggage and other cargo.

The rightmost seat at the very back of the bus was empty. In the seat next to it sat Wilhelm Schultz. He was a seventeen-year-old with light brown hair and brown eyes.

Across the aisle from him sat his friend, who was from the same year. There was no one else in the seat next to him, either.

The two students were wearing identical outfits.

They wore thick, short boots, dark grey wool pants, light green turtleneck sweaters, and fur-lined leather coats that cut off just above the knee. Over the left breast were their name tags, and embroidered on their right arms were the crest of Raputoa's Ministry of Education —a book lying on a small boat.

The bus was driving along a snowy mountain road.

The steep slope was covered in snow. The trees they saw on occasion were also coated in white. The road snaked up and down, and though it was paved and wide, it was extremely slippery.

The bus spewed black smoke as it struggled up the mountain. There were no other vehicles in front of of behind it. There was nothing but snow-white mountains all around. On the other side of the U-shaped valley they saw yet more razor-sharp mountain peaks. The sky was blue. The morning sun was blinding.

"It's beautiful… I'm glad I came on the trip. I'm glad I got this chance." Wil said, staring out the window.

"Yeah. It's all good save for the cold." His friend replied, fixing his collar with a gloved hand.

The interior of the bus was freezing. Every window had been opened, allowing the cold mountain air to sweep inside.

The interior of the bus was a sad sight, for yet another reason.

In the first row sat three teachers from Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School. Sprawled out haphazardly behind them were eighteen fourth-and fifth-year students, all looking quite pale. Each student was hunched over a bag made of wax paper.

Because the bus shook violently along the snowy mountain road, the students were all suffering from motion sickness. And because the heating made their sickness worse, the driver shut off the heater and the windows were opened to let fresh air inside.

"I mean, I grew up motorboating and horseback riding, so I'm perfectly fine. But I'm surprised you're all right, Wil." Wil's friend said, looking ahead at the sorry scene before him.

Wil thought for a moment, and responded.

"I've been on worse, so this doesn't feel too bad in comparison. It's been a long haul, so I'm not surprised everyone is sick. But I think the others pushed themselves too hard, staying up so late. And they ate too much, too."

"Right."

The teachers and students had left the dorms in the village of Makkaniu the previous morning.

They had spent half the day on a train, comfortably heading to the city of Elitesa at the southernmost tip of Raputoa. It was a city affectionately known as the 'Knee of the Central Mountain Range'. They were scheduled to arrive in the evening; then they would get some rest for the difficult trip awaiting them the next day.

But the train had been delayed over and over again. Wil noted that it might be best to get some sleep on the train while they could, so he and his friend napped in their seats. But the other students had chattered excitably, eventually being scolded by the teachers and the other passengers.

The train finally made it to Elitesa late that night. It was midnight by the time the students got to bed, having had to skip dinner. They forced themselves out of bed early the next morning, then had breakfast. It was a simple meal, much like the one they had when they left the dorms.

"Since we're taking the bus, we'll be better off eating light." Wil had said. His friend followed his advice. But most of the other students, too hungry to think, stuffed themselves.

They departed from Elitesa while it was still quite dark. The road soon grew rough, winding in every direction. They had to spend a long time on the shaking bus, with precious few stops at gas stations along the way. They were scheduled to arrive in Iks sometime in the afternoon.

The bus shook violently as it continued along the snowy mountain. Yet another student leaned over his bag and vomited.

"I can practically hear what he's thinking. 'I should have studied harder', I bet. But it's not like he's gonna die from this." Wil's friend said casually, and reached into his luggage behind him. He groped through a pocket on the side of the bag and fished out a bag of dried apricots. Taking out two pieces, he tossed one into his mouth and held out the other to Wil. Wil took it with a word of thanks.

Wil's friend chewed on the apricot for a while, then swallowed.

"Anyway."

"Yeah?"

"What kind of a country are we headed for?"

"Wha…?"

Wil turned. His friend was serious.

"Sorry, man. Back at orientation, I was sitting at the back of the class, sleeping with my eyes open. So I don't remember a thing. All I know is the name of the place."

Wil chuckled, amused.

"All right. It'll be no fun if you go in there without knowing a thing. Let me explain."

"Sweet. That apricot just now was your payment. Deal?"

The Kingdom of Iks, or 'Iks' for short.

This was what the country was called in the Roxchean language. In Iks, however, the country was officially called 'Ikstova'.

The only landmass on the planet was a potato-shaped continent. The Roxcheanuk Confederation was on the eastern side of the continent, and was composed of fourteen countries of varying size, the Capital District, and the Economic District. The Kingdom of Iks was part of Roxche, on the easternmost tip of the Central Mountain Range that vertically bisected the continent. It was one of the westernmost countries in Roxche, and the only mountainous country in the Confederation, which consisted largely of flat plains.

The Central Mountain Range was the longest and largest mountain range in the world, with several peaks that stood over ten thousand meters tall. On the eastern part of the mountain range was a hollow, on the inside of which was the massive Lake Ras. The lake stretched vertically from north to south for about 100 kilometers. At its widest, the lake was approximately forty kilometers in width. It was about 1500 meters above sea level. The lake and the valleys surrounding it were all created by glaciers during the ice age.

Human settlements were scattered around the lake. Of them, only two were large enough to be called 'cities'. One was Kunst, the capital city located on a plain southwest of Lake Ras. The other was the bus's current destination—Mushke, northeast of the lake. Both cities had populations numbering at tens of thousands.

There were villages nestled within the deep valleys surrounding the lake. Because there were steep slopes just a stone's throw from the lakeshore, there was nowhere else in particular where people could settle. There was one village per one of hundreds of valleys. The individual villages were extremely small, with populations numbering from hundreds to two or three thousand. Many tiny communities were scattered everywhere.

"So that Lake something-or-other…"

"Lake Ras."

"Right. So is the area around Lake Ras the only place people live? Nobody else lives any higher up?"

"They couldn't, even if they wanted to. A little further from the lake, the mountain climbs at a sharp angle. And the snow never melts, even in the summer. Also, the western border of the Kingdom of Iks is also part of the border between Roxche and the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. But Iks's western border isn't clearly defined. That's why neither Roxche nor Sou Be-Il know exactly how big the Kingdom of Iks actually is."

"I get it. What else?"

Historically, the Kingdom of Iks had little contact with the countries on the plains.

For certain reasons, people came to settle the lake area in the distant past. Eventually, a small kingdom emerged around Lake Ras.

Time passed, and the Middle Ages began. That was when a kingdom on the western edge—in other words, a kingdom that existed near present-day Raputoa—invaded Ikstova to conquer it. But the kingdom's prized mounted forces were rendered powerless by the mountains, and they were driven back by Ikstova's army, which had been lying in wait in the mountain passes.

Now and then, the only ways to enter the country were through one of two mountain passes. One was the northern pass, along which the bus was currently moving. The other was the southern pass, which connected Kunst to the lowlands. The northern pass, which was located at an extremely high altitude, would soon be blocked by snowfall.

That was why Ikstova was one of the few countries that participated little in the conflict between East and West. Of course, it had no contact with the West, which was across the mountain range.

In the year 3122 of the World Calendar, the Roxcheanuk Confederation was formed peacefully for the united purpose of defeating Sou Be-Il. Ikstova resisted membership to the end.

"Why?"

"Apparently, the biggest reason was the Roxchean language. The Roxchean we speak now is an artificial language based on the words and script used in what is now the Capital District. It's completely different from the language of Ikstova. That's why they were more reluctant than other countries to use Roxchean or teach it in their schools. They eventually joined the Confederation, but they continued to teach classes in Ikstovan for a long time."

"Right. …But we'll be able to talk to the people there, right?"

"Don't worry. Everyone this side of the river can speak Roxchean now. You know how almost no one speaks Raputoan anymore, right?"

"Gran used to swear in Raputoan sometimes before she passed away. Nobody understood what she was saying, but she always chuckled to herself. But Wil, why'd they have to make everyone speak the same language?"

"It makes things a lot more efficient. But the biggest reason is because of the military. It was to make sure that, even if a large war broke out against Sou Be-Il, all soldiers under the Confederation's banner could communicate with one another."

"I get it."

"Let's get back on track."

"Right."

The Royal Family of Iks had an unusual custom.

It was mandated that the monarch have only one child, who would eventually take the throne. This tradition was supposedly created to prevent feuds between family. But it was nearly a miracle that the royal line remained unbroken for four hundred years.

Another unusual tradition of the Royal Family was their incredible secrecy. Members of the family other than the king(or queen) did not so much as come out in public, let alone allow themselves to be revealed on canvas or photograph. Not even their names were revealed prior to their deaths. That was why most civilians knew very little about them.

There was an interesting anecdote about the custom. There was once a music teacher who was extremely strict on a boy who came to learn the violin. The boy was a hard worker and an obedient student, but he would adamantly refuse to take off the pendant around his neck, even though it got in the way of his playing the violin. Several years after he finished his lessons, the music teacher was called to the royal palace, only to find out that the boy was actually the prince of Iks. The little golden coin on his pendant was proof of his royal lineage. The boy eventually succeeded the throne and became a beloved king who greatly supported the development of music in the kingdom.

After joining the Roxcheanuk Confederation, Iks slowly transitioned into a constitutional monarchy, like other kingdoms. The monarch had even fewer opportunities to appear in public.

However, the kings and queens of Iks remained very popular. The people of Iks, quite simple and trusting, loved their royal family. And their steadfast nature in the face of the deadly climate was enough to give the people a slow, peaceful life.

"That's pretty amazing. Completely different from the Royal Family of Raputoa and all their backstabbing. Although Raputoa's not a kingdom anymore."

"Iks doesn't have a monarch anymore, either."

"Why not?"

"There was an unfortunate incident about ten years ago. A fire broke out in the royal palace in the middle of the night, and everything went up in smoke. The queen, her husband, and their young daughter all went missing. They probably died—the investigators found a lot of burnt corpses in the rubble. And they only figured this out later, but some of the bodies showed signs of having been shot."

"So it was a coup d'état? Or a terrorist attack?"

"The thing is, no one benefitted from the royal family's death. No one claimed responsibility for it, either. No one knows what really happened, and the perpetrators are still at large. There's even rumors that soldiers from the West crossed over the mountains and assassinated them."

"Is that even possible?"

"Probably not. How could anyone climb over mountains ten thousand meters high, in the middle of winter? It's probably just a rumor. Although some people still believe it."

"Huh. You said that was ten years ago, right? I never heard about any of this. Didn't it make the news or anything?"

"According to the guidebook, it did. They have a picture of the newspaper from the day, with the queen's portrait published and everything. But that happened to be at the peak of the Lestki Island conflict. The entire world was on the verge of a second Great War."

"Right. I remember that part. My entire family was just about to skip town to head further east. Leaving all the employees behind."

"That's… something."

"Awful, ain't it? Anyway, I think I'm getting the picture. Keep going."

Afterwards, Iks came to be known as a kingdom without a king. Although there was no one on the throne, laws regarding the monarch remained steadfast within the country's constitution.

A park was built on the land where the royal palace once stood. The students were scheduled to visit the park during their stay at the capital. The park was famous for the ceremonial changing of the guard, which still took place today.

As of today, Iks was neither particularly rich in resources nor particularly developed. But it was peaceful and beautiful.

Its major industries were dairy farming, forestry, and fishing in Lake Ras. Iks exported dairy products, high-quality lumber, and traditional handicrafts to the lowlands.

Of particular note was the kingdom's historic gold mines. Intricately crafted gold accessories from Iks were famous in Roxche, and sold for a hefty price. So refined was Iks's metalworking technique that elaborate family crests could be carved into something as small as a button.

There were rumors that the kingdom strictly regulated the emigration of artisans to prevent their techniques from being leaked to the outside. But in reality, even the common villager was capable of such intricate work, which probably meant that the rumor was only a rumor.

During the summer, Iks made a great deal of money from visitors who came to escape the heat, tour the country, or go mountain climbing.

The most notable of Iks's imports was automobiles and other machinery. There was not a single factory capable of creating automobiles or engines in all of Iks. Their main mode of transportation was still horse-drawn carriages or sleds, which did not need expensive gasoline.

A strange fact about Iks was that transportation was easier and more active during the cold winter months. The transportation of produce and lumber from the villages to the cities always took place during the winter.

"Why do you think that is?"

"What is this, a pop quiz? C'mon, Wil. Give me a hint."

"You said before you've been horseback riding, motorboating, and skating before, right?"

"Ah! I've got it. The lake. The, uh…"

"Lake Ras."

"That. It's because the lake freezes over, right? In the summer, you'd have to go around it or take a boat, but in the winter, you can just take a sled over it."

"Yeah. That's why there's a clock tower that works as a lighthouse at the entrance of every village and city. They light the area with a bonfire or a gas lamp. On clear days, people use the towers as beacons and cross the lake in a straight line with nothing but a compass on hand."

"Uh huh. …Hey, we're pretty high up. I wonder if we're near the pass yet?"

"I hope we are. Before we get there, I'll tell you a couple of things you should know."

"Okay."

The city of Mushke was on the northeastern tip of Lake Ras.

A little ways up the mountains northeast of Mushke was a massive valley.

The valley was a path carved by a gigantic glacier in the distant past. It spanned a distance five kilometers wide, leading endlessly into the heart of the Central Mountain Range. The drop was a whopping eight hundred meters at an angle perfectly perpendicular to the ground. 'Terrifying' was an understatement.

If the land northeast of Mushke had been a little lower—in other words, if the Lake Ras glacier, connected to the gigantic glacier, had dug in a little deeper, the water from Lake Ras would have flowed into the valley, leaving the land desolate.

The cliff carved by the glacier was called 'Slankalans' in Ikstovan, and it was the highest known cliff in Roxche. It was currently a famous tourist destination—there was a viewpoint on the edge of the cliffs, just a little way up from Mushke. The students were scheduled to visit it the next day.

"That sounds fantastic! I'm so glad I joined this trip!"

"I guess you really did sleep through classes. We learned about Slankalans back in second-year geography."

"Not to brag or anything, but I dozed off then, too. But this is amazing. An 800-meter-high cliff, huh. Amazing. I don't think I'd like to climb that, but it'd feel nice to jump off it, I think."

"…You'd die."

"Whoa, I'm not jumping off until *after* I've figured out a way to survive. Can you think of anything?"

"They didn't teach us in class."

"Heh. That was pretty funny, Wil."

"Ah. About the name 'Slankalans'."

"Yeah?"

"It means 'not even the soul returns'. If you fall, I mean. In the old days, people didn't even go near the cliffs. And today, it's a popular suicide destination."

"…"

"Still thinking of jumping?"

"Not for a while. So what was the other thing you wanted to tell me?"

"This doesn't really matter to us, just to warn you. It's about politics."

"Politics? Forget it. Just give me the summary."

"All right."

In two days—the 22nd—there would be a referendum taking place in Iks.

A small political party was pushing for Ikstova's withdrawal from the Confederation. In other words, they intended for Ikstova to exist as an independent nation as it was in the past. The party wanted the citizens' opinions, making speeches in the city square in Kunst every day. Ikstova was probably going to be quite busy today and tomorrow, with the referendum drawing near.

Even if Ikstova pulled out of the Confederation, it could not go back to isolation like before. It would also stop receiving an annual budget from the government of Roxche. Because of these reasons, and many others, it was unlikely that many people would agree with the proposal for independence.

But it was indeed true that a referendum like this was a first in Roxche's history. Now that the chances of another war had been greatly diminished, the glue holding the Confederation together was slowly beginning to crumble.

"That last part I read in a newspaper. The referendum's why we're starting with the north and leaving Kunst for later—to avoid the hustle and bustle."

"Man… politics. Nothing to do with me. But thanks for the lectures. I think I'll be better off now, Wil. I really owe you. …By the way, have you decided on a topic for your research paper?"

"What? No, not yet. I wonder what I should do. One of the teachers gave me a few ideas. I might use one of those."

"What ideas?"

"'Transportation in Iks, and the Co-existence of Automobiles and Carriages'. 'The History of Iks in Relation to Roxche'. 'A Discussion on the Isolation of Iks'. 'Flora Unique to the Mountain Regions'… They're titles from some reference books. I think one of the teachers might have brought them."

"Tell me once you've decided on a topic. I'll use the second-best one. Apricot?"

"Sure."

* * *

"We've arrived at the northern pass. Let's take a short rest. There are restrooms outside if anyone would like to use them." Said the bus driver. Sighs of tired relief flooded the seats.

The bus soon drove down a slope and entered a parking lot by the pass.

The northern pass had once been a small fortress. The corner of the flat piece of land was reinforced with a stone wall. The stone building with a watch station on its roof was still intact, used as a viewpoint and a rest area to this day.

They were above the tree line; not a single leaf was in sight.

Three trucks loaded with lumber were parked side-by-side in the parking lot. The driver parked the bus next to them.

Teachers and students alike stumbled out of the bus, scrambling for the restroom. A couple of people slipped and fell on the frozen paving stones.

"Looks like there's going to be a line. Let's wait a bit." Said Wil's friend, stepping off the bus and putting on a wool hat. He raised his arms and stretched, taking a deep breath.

A gust blew in from the valley, buffeting them with icy wind. Wil also pulled on his hat. He exhaled, his breath rising in a long, white puff.

Wil and his friend walked over to the edge of the parking lot and stood behind the stone railings. Before them were the slopes and road they had just climbed by bus; beyond were peaks rising high into the air, so brilliant they had to squint to look at them.

"Amazing."

"It's beautiful."

They spent some time in silence, lost in the atmosphere. Wil eventually spoke up.

"Let's have a look at the other side."

"Yeah."

They cautiously crossed the parking lot on the other side of the building, passing by a snowplow and making it to the opposite edge. They stopped.

"Whoa…"

"This side is awesome, too… Well… it's just awesome."

First, they saw the Central Mountain Range rising before them like an insurmountable wall. The slopes were a pure white, and the peaks rose into the clouds and disappeared.

Underneath was a great hollow, and they could see part of the frozen Lake Ras. The white of the frozen lake was slightly different from the white of the forest around it, making clear the contours of the lake. But so great was the landscape before them that they could not get a grip on the scale of the sight.

It almost felt like looking down at an intricate scale model in a museum. As though a tiny Lake Ras was within arm's reach.

"That's Mushke over there." Wil said, pointing at a blue clump small enough to hide behind his fist. It was next to Lake Ras, on the lower right from their perspective.

"It looks tiny from here, but it's actually a pretty big city. The color's because roofs in Iks are blue."

"Man… this is so huge I don't know what to say. …And speaking of which, I don't see the cliff from here."

"It's on the other side of the ridge, to the right. Apparently you can't see it from the pass or the road."

"Anyway, this is great. Good thing you came along, eh, Wil?" Wil's friend laughed, heartily punching him in the shoulder.

"Yeah. Definitely." Wil replied, and added to himself, "Thanks to Allison."

In a building at the northern pass was a room used by the building manager. Desks lined the walls, and wood was burning in the fireplace. A middle-aged man began to make a phone call. He was alone in the room.

The man soon spoke into the receiver.

"Hello? Yes. This is the manager of the northern pass. Would you be the soldier from earlier? Yes, yes. It's about that bus. It's just departed safely. Yes. Just about on schedule."

He could hear the voice from the other end. It was the voice of a somewhat cold-sounding man.

<Understood. You have our thanks. Your work is done.>

The middle-aged man was dubious.

"Is… is this really all? I expected more, considering what you gave me…"

<That is none of your business. Your work is done. Thank you for your cooperation.>

"Anyway, about that bus… is there someone important going incognito on it?" The middle-aged man asked, a little excited.

<Your pay includes hush money.> Replied the cold voice.

“Ah, excuse me… Of course. I won’t ask any more questions. I’m very sorry, sir. Of course.”

The middle-aged man apologized.

* * *

Putting down the phone was a man in his thirties.

He turned to his friend, who was waiting behind him.

“The prince has arrived on schedule. Commence the operation.”

Chapter 2: Kidnapping

Afterwards, the bus drove all the way down a road so steep and winding that a man could probably fall and die before he felt any pain. Once they entered the hollow, which looked very much like the base of a cauldron, a coniferous forest rose up around them and the road led into a gentle downward slope.

Before their eyes unfolded the city of Mushke and its blue roofs. Further ahead they could see the snow-white Lake Ras. It was too far to make out anything across it, save for the mountains in the hazy distance.

There were black dots scattered on Lake Ras. Noticing them, Wil's friend called him over to the other side of the bus. But they passed by so quickly that the dots disappeared from sight.

"Is that a gathering of some kind? Are those ice fishing tents?"

"They're not the right size. Ah well."

The bus pressed onward.

A little before they entered the city, the single road that had not branched since the pass suddenly forked to the right. The branch on the right was a straight road paved in a gentle incline. On a little road sign buried in snow were the words 'To Slankalans Viewpoint'.

The bus entered Mushke.

The road was still covered in a thin layer of snow. It was hard and slippery. The buildings in Mushke were built in a style rather different from those in the Roxche lowlands. They were two-story stone buildings, sturdy like castle walls. The round windows opened both ways, and had such thick frames that they had little room for glass. The blue-roofed houses were clustered together with very little room between the buildings. The roofs were all built in the same angle toward the alleyways so that snow would pile up only in one direction.

Next to the lakeside, at about the center of the city, was a large steeple. Atop the stone structure was a gas lamp. Under the lamp was a large clock.

The roads were very wide, with meter-long trenches on either side. Perhaps they were built that way to make it easier to clear the snow.

The bus lazily drove through the city. The main street was lined with little shops on either side. There were almost no other cars in the road, and very few people were out and about. Little horse-drawn carriages came and went at an unhurried pace.

"Whoa. What year is this?" Wil's friend wondered, his face nearly touching the window. Wil advised him that it might be rude to act so curious.

There were very few completely straight sections of the road. They were intentionally set in zigzagging formations, making it difficult to get a good look at the city. At every fork the road intersected in strange directions. Each time, the driver had to stop the bus and look at a map. Then, he had to open his window and check to make sure there were no pedestrians or carriages in his way before starting the bus again.

“For defensive purposes, they made the city difficult to navigate. But apparently they’ve never had enemies get this far.”

“Right. This is really confusing.”

The bus eventually escaped the labyrinthine streets and emerged into the lakeshore area. On the left side of the lone road heading south were tall, recently-built structures. Behind them at an angle were yet more forests. On the right side of the street was a narrow tree-lined footpath, a lakeshore dotted with boats tied to piers, and an endless field of ice.

The bus stopped at the front doors of one of the large buildings. It was a magnificent structure that stood at seven stories high—the most expensive hotel in the area, in the city that teemed with tourists during the summer.

The students disembarked with sighs of relief. The bellboy opened the back door of the bus and began to gingerly carry away the luggage.

Wil’s friend sounded quite satisfied with the hotel. Wil stepped off the bus after him, and was floored by the luxury.

His friend tapped on his shoulder.

“C’mon, Wil. Don’t look too uncomfortable. Who knows? Staying at a fancy place like this might help, one of these days. And y’know, enjoying the trip’s the least you could do for the person who paid for it.”

Wil smiled and nodded, and thanked his friend for being so considerate. His friend chuckled awkwardly.

“Well, I thought the apricots were a little cheap to pay you back with.”

They stepped inside.

A man was watching everything from a car in the distance through a pair of binoculars. He picked up a wireless communicator.

“This is Kernel. Blockhead, respond. The prince has entered the lodgings. I repeat. The target has entered the lodgings”

He soon heard an answer.

<This is Blockhead. Understood, Kernel. Will report to the princess. Now entering Phase 2.>
The moment the man put down the wireless, a woman spoke up from the back seat.

“That aside, we really have a lot of time on our hands, huh?”

“Don’t remind me.” The man replied.

* * *

The students and teachers from Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School first went into their rooms to unpack. They were beautifully-furnished twin rooms with en suite bathrooms and toilets. Afterwards, everyone gathered at the lobby for lunch. The students had left their coats in their rooms, and were now wearing school sweaters. Most looked very tired.

They entered the large restaurant on the first floor and were led to their seats. Because it was the off-season, there were no other guests.

One by one, expensive dishes were lined up before them on the long table. The main dish was small fish from the lake, fried whole. Served next to it on the same plate were some boiled vegetables. There was also a large metal bowl filled with salad they could refill endlessly, aromatic, fresh-baked bread, an abundance of dairy products, a bowl full of fruits in spite of the season, a bottle of ice water with lemon juice, milk, a pot of tea, and honey.

"Let's eat!"

With a quick prayer before their meal, Wil and his friend—who had purposely eaten small breakfasts—dug in. They chowed down with no end in sight.

"This is great! It's amazing."

"It's really delicious. These little fish, especially. I've never eaten anything like this before."

"Try the cheese and the butter, Wil."

"Yeah. Are these fresh, I wonder?"

The other students slowly nibbled at their food and watched so very resentfully.

After lunch, the teacher discussed several points of note.

Because of the difficult trip to Iks, the group tour of Mushke was canceled. Students had free rein to do as they pleased until dinnertime. They were free to look around the city, but students had to be accompanied by at least one other person while outside the hotel. They were to tell a teacher who from what room was leaving, and leave their keys at the front desk. They were to call the hotel in case of an emergency. And last of all, they were to conduct themselves as secondary school students representing the future of Raputoa, refraining from any actions that might embarrass their homeland or cause trouble for the people of Iks.

Most students elected to return to their rooms for some rest.

"I can't believe you two are completely fine… Well, I suppose I won't have to worry about you, if Schultz is going along. You may leave the hotel."

"What is that supposed to mean, sir?"

Wil and his friend were the only ones who went outside. They put on their coats, hats and jackets. They packed their guidebooks and goggles(for preventing snow-blindness) in their little bags and went outside to walk around the city.

"I can't see those tents from here." Wil's friend commented, looking out toward the north from Lake Ras.

It was so bright that they were both wearing their goggles. In the distance they could make out the mountains, but the opposite side of the lake could not be seen. Ahead of them was nothing but a flat, white world.

"Say, Wil. What do you think we should call this? A water horizon or a land horizon?"

"Good question."

Wil tilted his head.

Pulling down their goggles around their necks, they began to walk back into the downtown area, through which the bus had driven. There was a large sign at the entrance—a detailed map of the maze-like streets. There were the southern and northern entrances to the city. Then there was the slope that led to the pier and the lake.

"…"

Wil stared carefully at the map. His friend waited patiently.

A moment later, Wil turned.

"I think we'll be all right."

"If you say so."

They entered the downtown area. Wil looked around everywhere like a lost child, enjoying the walk through the city.

People in Mushke tended to have black hair. The men dressed similarly to men on the lowlands, but the women were wearing clothes of an interesting design. They wore long one-piece dresses in the pattern of quilted mosaics. On their feet they wore boots that were tied at the ankles to prevent snow from entering. They also wore shawls over their heads.

Their clothes, which were made up of many pieces of cloth, descended from traditional values where cloth was considered very precious. Wil explained that some dresses were made in the traditional way, quilted together from scraps of cloth, while others were only designed to resemble the traditional style.

It was just when they had turned a corner.

"What's this?"

Wil's friend wondered out loud, pointing at a poster on the wall. The same poster had been pasted at regular intervals starting from a certain point. It was impossible not to notice them.

They walked up to the poster and carefully examined it.

On it was a photograph of a man. The photograph was clearly expensive, as it was in full color. The man was in his forties, with his black hair slicked back. He wore a grey suit, and was sitting in a chair with one leg crossed over the other with his hands over his lap. He was smiling—with an optimistic evaluation, he looked rather elegant. Less optimistically, he looked irritating. Underneath were written the words:

“What’s this, now? ‘I, Owen Nichto, promise to transform our homeland of Ikstova into a treasure of the Confederation and a world leader in tourism. Separation from Roxche is like smashing a finely-crafted piece of clockwork’.”

Wil’s friend went up to the poster and read the text out loud.

“So it’s a political ad, huh. Man, I thought it was a poster for a film.” He said, clearly uninterested.

There was a small wooden box under the poster with the words ‘feel free to take’, containing a large pile of notebook-sized flyers. They were of the same design as the large poster. Under the photograph was the phone number and address of the campaign office, as well as a stamp with additional text: ‘Appearing in the debate and rally at the Kunst Main Street Balcony on the 20th and the 21st! Tune in to the live radio broadcast’.

Wil’s friend picked up a flyer. He looked at the photograph, printed very clearly and brightly on the piece of paper.

“This ring looks really pricey. And look at these ridiculous gold cufflinks. I see a lot of rich old upstarts dressed up fancy like this back in Raputoa and the lowlands, too. At parties and stuff…”

Wil’s friend trailed off. Ten seconds later, he handed the flyer to Wil.

“Bingo. Check this out, Wil. His bio.”

“Hm?”

Written on the flyer was Owen Nichto’s stunning biography.

Born in Kunst in 3242 to a shopkeeper’s family. Graduated at the top of the class from a local secondary school. Graduated at the top of the class from Confederation Capital University with a degree in economics. Started a successful lumber export business in Kunst. Elected as a Member of Parliament in 3269. Retired in 3279 after two terms. Selected as a management consultant to the Terreur foundation.

“Terreur… *That* Terreur, huh.” Wil mumbled. His friend chimed in.

“Yeah. The nouveau riche who hit it big during the Great War.”

“‘Returned to Iks, re-elected in 3286. Currently 45 years old’.” Wil read out the last line of the biography.

“I don’t get what goes through businessmen’s heads.” Wil’s friend sighed, and turned over the flyer. It was blank.

“The paper’s pretty nice. Maybe we should take ‘em to use to take notes?”

“That’s kind of—”

“Right. And who wants to look at a cheesy picture like that, anyway?”

Wil’s friend tossed the flyer back into the box.

They began to walk through the streets again. As they cautiously stepped away from the ditches by the roadside, a car drove up from behind and overtook them.

“Hey. It’s been a while since we’ve seen any cars around here.” Wil’s friend said.

At that moment, the car changed lanes and stopped at the roadside, next to a store. It was a small four-wheel drive vehicle. The car was painted a dark green, and was just big enough to hold four passengers. It was the sort of car widely used in the Roxche military and police force.

Three people disembarked. Two men in their thirties and a woman in her twenties. They were all wearing long, black coats, and had sunglasses over their eyes.

“They look pretty shady. Wonder if they’re muggers.” Wil’s friend whispered. The trio in black—did *not* head into the store.

They walked straight up to Wil and his friend.

“D-did I do something—” His friend began. However, the people stopped in front of Wil and looked him in the eye.

One of the men was the first to speak.

“You would be Mr. Schultz, correct? From the secondary school in Raputoa?”

Wil’s friend looked at him curiously. Wil glanced down at his name tag, with the name ‘Schultz’ printed on it in large letters. He then glanced at the crest on his left arm.

“As you can see, yes.”

The three people exchanged glances and nodded. Without warning, the two men walked past Wil.

“Apologies.”

One of the men said.

“What? Wh-whoa!”

As if on cue, the men suddenly lifted Wil into the air by the back and legs. They then began walking in the opposite direction from the car.

“Huh? W-wait a second!”

The woman walking next to the men looked up at Wil, who was hoisted in midair.

“Don’t worry, Wilhelm. We have no intention of harming you.”

“H-how did you know my name?” Wil asked, turning to the woman.

“Don’t worry. We’re not suspicious people.” One of the men said.

“That’s a little difficult to believe.” Wil replied.

The four people strode forward.

“Some strange friends you’ve got here, Wil. And this isn’t a mugging—it’s a kidnapping. It looks like my deductive skills have a long way to go.”

Wil’s friend criticized himself and followed the group without a care.

All of a sudden, a car drove up in front of them. It was only slightly bigger than the small cars used for racing, and was much smaller than the four-wheel drive vehicle from earlier. It was a two-seater convertible with the roof covered. This vehicle was usually reserved for officers transporting personnel or for communications purposes.

The car came screeching to a stop in front of the group, its chained tires digging into the snow. The woman opened the roof. The men gently tossed Wil into the passenger seat.

“Whoa!”

The moment Wil landed, one of the people in black quickly hooked the roof zipper.

“Hold on! What’s—”

The roof was zipped fully shut. At that moment,

“Mission complete.”

Wil heard a familiar voice from behind him. He quickly turned and found himself face-to-face with a blond, blue-eyed girl.

“…”

He gaped.

The girl reached forward and gently pushed back his hat and bangs. There was a faint scar on Wil’s left temple.

Lowering her hand, the girl smiled and said in a cheerful voice:

“It’s been a long time, Wil. How are you?”

“Allison…?”

“The one and only.”

The girl—Allison Whittington—nodded with a grin.

And,

“What, were you expecting someone else?”

She said, her smile refusing to leave her face.

“It looks like you’re doing just fine. For your information, I’ve been well enough that you didn’t have to worry about me.”

Allison was wearing the Roxche Air Force uniform. Long boots with excellent grip, calf-high winter tights that prevented snow from spilling inside, and thick, dark grey coveralls that doubled as a flight suit, with a green shirt peeking out from under the collar. She was wearing a warm brown coat that cut off just above the knees. It had a built-in belt and a hood. Her long blond hair was tied into a ponytail and tucked into her coat. On her lap was a small cloth bag.

Fixing her grip on the steering wheel, Allison leaned in close to Wil in the cramped car.

“Well, let’s go!”

Wil looked at her. Her bangs were nearly touching his face. With confusion clear in his face, he asked,

“What? But… what’s going on here, Allison? What’re you—”

“I’ll explain on the way!” Allison cried, waving at the two men and the woman on the other side of the windshield. The trio waved back. With her right hand Allison shifted gears and started the car.

The car began to move. It immediately swerved.

“Ah! Allison, we’re not allowed to act on our own—WHOA!”

The car accelerated.

“We are from the Roxche Air Force.” One of the men in black said to Wil’s friend, as the car haphazardly departed.

“Did you see the driver? She is our trusted comrade and the childhood friend of Wil, Staff Sergeant Allison Whittington. We intend to give them some uninterrupted time alone.”

“…”

Wil’s friend looked up at the man with a face both astonished and floored.

“We understand that you are not permitted to be out alone. Though we assume that a secondary school student like you must know right from wrong, in this case we must ask for your cooperation.”

“No way.” Wil’s friend replied.

“So you’ll play the good student and stick to the rules? We can provide you with some hush money if you’d like.” The man said, flashing his wallet.

“No way. I never said I’d tell on you. I’m glad to help!” The friend said, giving the trio a thumbs-up.

“Excellent choice.” The man nodded.

"Oh, and I don't need any hush money. It feels kinda weird saying this, but I'm from the third richest family in Raputoa."

"I see…" The man withdrew his wallet.

The woman looked at the name tag on Wil's friend's coat.

"…Hey, that name… By any chance, does your family run—"

Somewhat surprised, she identified a company so famous that any Roxchean would recognize the name.

Wil's friend nodded.

The woman and one of the men exchanged glances and began to whisper amongst themselves.

"What do you want to do? We might make a fortune off of this one."

"Right. We could hold him for ransom and get the money via aeroplane."

"What if we tossed a rope over the side, had them tie up and hook the money bag to it, and pulled it up?"

The man who had flashed the wallet ignored his two companions and turned to Wil's friend.

"We'll make sure he's back by evening. Until then, we'll be counting on you. Make sure none of the teachers find out."

Wil's friend frowned.

"Wait, he's coming back tonight? What kind of plan is that? If you got the target in your sights, you gotta shoot him down! Go all the way!"

The two men and the woman were silent for a moment.

Then,

"Well… that's not for us to decide. This is as far as we go." The woman said.

* * *

"THIS TIME! IT WAS HERE!"

The roar of the engine. The shaking of the car. The rattling of the roof. The interior of the car was filled with a cacophony of sounds, and Allison contributed with her voice.

"A JOINT SEARCH-AND-RESCUE MISSON! HERE IN IKS! I HEARD ABOUT IT NOT LONG AFTER I READ YOUR LETTER! AND WHEN I HEARD ABOUT YOUR STUDY TRIP! I THOUGHT THIS MUST BE FATE!"

"I understand that, Allison. Could you please slow down just a—"

"Oh, sorry."

Allison lifted her foot very slightly from the gas pedal. The car finally escaped the excitement of its driver and began to move at acceptable speeds.

"We've been in training for eight days, but we finished up yesterday. Today and tomorrow, we're prepping for departure and getting some time off. So I decided I just *had* to go somewhere with you."

"I see. So that's why you were so insistent. …I understand."

"I thought about telling you ahead of time, but I wanted to make it a surprise. Oh, those people from before are from my unit."

"It really was a surprise." Wil chuckled. The car grew slightly faster.

"Since you were out without your teachers, I'm guessing you have a lot of free time today, right? Let's go somewhere together, just the two of us!"

"That sounds great, but…" Wil said hesitantly, "I'm not supposed to be moving on my own."

"I know. But your friend just has to keep his mouth shut, and you'll be fine, right?"

Wil hesitated.

"I guess. But…"

"Is your friend a tattletale?"

"No." Wil answered, this time immediately.

"Just thank him properly later."

"All right…"

"Then let's go."

"Where to?"

"There's someplace I'd like to visit. What about you? Did you want to take a look at that cliff?"

"We're scheduled to go see it tomorrow."

"I already went to see it yesterday. Then can we go where I want today?"

"All right. But just out of curiosity, Allison…"

"What is it?"

"Do you have a driver's license?"

"…That is a military secret, Mr. Schultz."

"So, no."

"What tipped you off?"

"Just drive safely…"

"Roger that."

Allison drove the car out of the downtown area, this time more cautiously. They reached the hotel, when Allison suddenly swerved to the right. The car drove over the snow and gravel on the lakeside, down the ramp used for lowering boats. It then drove straight onto the frozen lake.

On the lake, with no obstacles in sight, Allison hit the gas with no reservations. The roar of the engine, the screeching of the chains, and the shaking of the car worsened. But the car was not very fast to begin with; it felt quite slow on the field of ice.

Wil put on his goggles. Allison put on a pair of sunglasses she produced from her bag. She looked at Wil.

"How do I look?"

"Great. Did you buy those?"

"They're actually Air Force-issue shades. I'll get in a lot of trouble if I lose it." Allison said, tilting her head and glancing at the rear-view mirror. She smiled.

The car drove through the snow and headed north along the lakeshore. Mushke passed by to their left.

"Where are we headed?" Wil asked.

"I see it. Look over there." Allison said, pointing forward with the same hand that was on the steering wheel.

There was a black mass ahead, on the white field. It grew closer and closer.

"Stop. There's an inspection point."

Allison stopped the car.

The inspection point was little more than two small windproof tents used for ice fishing, and two soldiers manning it. A road leading there from Mushke had been plowed in a straight line, and the tents had been erected on either side.

Allison's car approached one of the tents from the side. One of the soldiers was holding a circular sign mounted on a pole. On the sign was a red 'X', which meant 'Stop'.

The soldiers were wearing dark grey winter coats tied at the waist with decorative belts. On their heads they wore fur-lined winter hats, and they had slightly tinted goggles over their eyes. They had submachine guns slung over their shoulders by leather straps. The submachine guns were equipped with wooden butt plates with holes drilled through them,

and looked like rifles with the front ends sawed off. The long, curved magazines were currently equipped, so the soldiers could open fire at any time.

"Ah. This is what my friend must've spotted. It really was an encampment."

Wil looked at the cluster of tents ahead of them. There was a veritable village of them, a hundred meters from the shore.

A large portion of the lake had been cleared of snow, and the tents covered the icy surface. The tents were a mix of camouflage colors—black and dark green. The larger tents were rectangular; thirty meters long and ten meters wide[1]. Their frames were made of thick pipes, and the corners were securely fastened with rope. About eight of such tents were lined up in formation, like blocks of houses. The smaller tents were dome-shaped, about ten meters in diameter, and they dotted the vicinity. Other than the tents, there were trucks equipped with snowplows, several small cars, and oil drums containing fuel, stacked together.

Written in discreet lettering on the sides of the tent were three characters, which were neither Roxchean nor Ikstovan. They were initials that stood for 'Royal Air Force'.

"What?"

Wil took off his goggles and read the letters in shock. He looked up at the soldier approaching their car. On his left arm was the emblem of the Curved Dagger, an ancient symbol of the West.

"That's the Curved Dagger. Allison… is this a Sou Be-Il military base?"

"That's right." Allison replied cheerfully. Wil realized something.

"I see. You mentioned a joint training operation just now—you meant that Roxche and Sou Be-Il were cooperating on a session together, right?."

"Yeah. There's someone I wanted you to meet."

"What? Don't tell me…"

"Yes."

Allison unzipped the roof of their car. The perplexed soldier with the submachine gun greeted them in polite Roxchean.

"Good day. I'm terribly sorry, but this area is being used as a temporary base of operations for the Allied Forces of the Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. Because of special negotiations between Roxche and Sou Be-Il, civilians are not permitted to—"

"I know." Allison replied in fluent Bezelese—the official language of the West. The soldier was floored. Allison continued.

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[1] In the original text, the tents are described to be 30 meters in height, not length. …That didn't sound too plausible.

“We’re here to meet Major Carr Benedict, the Hero of the Mural. Here. We even have an official invitation.”

Allison produced a letter from her bag and handed it to the soldier. The man took off his gloves and goggles, read over its contents, and was floored for the second time. His eyes turned to dinner plates as he looked at Allison and Wil, astonished.

Allison slowly took off her sunglasses.

“May we come in?”

* * *

An aeroplane was flying over the hollow.

It was vibrant green in color, like the color of spring, and was about eight meters long. A water-cooling engine at the sharp nose of the aeroplane powered the propellers. The aeroplane had a single wing underneath the frame. Sticking out from under the middle of the frame was an angular radiator, and on either side of the radiator was the fixed landing gear and wheels, currently pointing upwards.

The aeroplane suddenly flew into an abrupt descent.

The cockpit was open to the air. A white muffler whipped in the wind, wrapped around the head of a pilot wearing a thick hat. There were two seats, one behind the other, but the back seat was occupied only by a heavy sack.

Painted proudly on the left side of the frame was a certain emblem.

It was a picture of a wooden beacon, with an upright shaft in the middle and a pair of curved arms arching upwards from either side. Red flames were drawn at the tips of the shaft and the arms.

The aeroplane descended sharply, spun three times, suddenly stopped, and headed upwards. Then, it returned to level position before making a sharp turn at a 90-degree tilt, after which it returned to level position once more.

As the nose of the aeroplane pointed due west, the great peaks of the Central Mountain Range—still dozens of kilometers away—rose up in the aeroplane’s path. The plane was but a speck of dust before the wall of white.

“It feels like this entire country is inside an aquarium. It’s beautiful.”

The pilot mumbled to himself as he looked to his lower left, and swerved. He descended and shook the plane left and right as he glided over the frozen lake.

<This is the command center. Respond, Major Carr.>

A radio signal. The pilot responded.

<This is Carr.>

<Sir. You have visitors from the Roxcheanuk Confederation. They're waiting for you right now.>

<Roger. I'll be landing shortly. They are important guests of mine—make sure you don't bother them unnecessarily. Over.>

The pilot's eyes narrowed as he pulled the control stick. The aeroplane climbed sharply as it spun, the frame glinting in the sunlight. At the end of the climb, the plane did a 180-degree spin and descended, speeding up as it returned to base.

"The major is currently out on a flight. He will be back shortly, so please come this way."

Allison and Wil were led across the ice by an amicable, bespectacled captain around thirty years of age. They could see aeroplanes inside the larger tents. The soldiers of the Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force stopped what they were doing in the tents and stared curiously at the two visitors.

On the east side of the camp was an endless field of ice.

Standing there alone was a dome-shaped tent used for communications. A generator was humming next to it, and there was a large antenna sticking out of the tent. A short distance away was a pole, from which hung a flag that displayed wind direction, and a spinning anemometer.

An area about 30 meters by 10 meters between the main camp and the communications tent had been cleared of snow. Placed at regular intervals along the wide taxiway were red-and-white cones. On the other side of the communications tent was a strip of ice hundreds of meters in length, completely clear of snow. It was the runway. Circular canisters were on top of the snow piled up on the side at regular intervals.

When the three arrived at the communications tent,

"He's here."

Allison was looking at the southern sky. Wil looked at the direction she was pointing at, but saw nothing. But eventually, he spotted a little dot in the distance.

"Your eyesight is as good as ever, Allison."

The captain who led them there was shocked. He gaped at Wil, who had spoken in fluent Bezelese.

As the dot drew nearer, it quickly took on the shape of an aeroplane.

Flying at a low altitude, the aeroplane screamed right past Allison and the others.

Then, it ascended rapidly, almost at a right angle from the ground. It flew high into the clear sky, the top of its frame clear in sight.

As Wil watched in awe, the aeroplane slowed, eventually being stopped by gravity. And before Wil could cry out in horror, the frame leaned to the left like an upright pencil falling sideways. The aeroplane descended, doing an about-face.

“Mm. He’s really good.” Allison commented. The aeroplane and the blue sky were reflected on her sunglasses.

The aeroplane began to descend rapidly. But its nose was slowly pulled up, finally bringing the frame level with the ground.

The plane first passed by Allison and the others, flew into the distance, then swerved back toward them and made a smooth landing on the runway. It began to taxi toward the tent, sending snow flying everywhere.

As he waited for the aeroplane to stop, Wil happened to turn around. And to his shock, he found about twenty or so young Sou Be-Il repair technicians gathered behind him. They were praising the Hero of the Mural. The gazes of the few female soldiers there were particularly intense.

Eventually, the aeroplane approached the group, still roaring loudly(though softer than before). Eventually, the engine and the propellers stopped. The plane itself came to a halt.

The pilot stood from his seat, climbed down onto the wing, and stepped down onto the ice. He pulled off his aviator hat and ran a hand through his messy hair. Spotting Allison and Wil in the distance, he smiled and waved.

Wil was assaulted from behind by the screams of the women, who had fallen under a terribly mistaken impression indeed.

“It’s been a long time, Major Carr.”

“It certainly has, Wil. And please, call me Benedict.” Major Carr Benedict replied to Wil’s greeting.

Carr Benedict, twenty-four years old. He was the hero who discovered the mural that ended the hostilities between East and West. At the time, he was a second lieutenant. But he was rewarded for his actions with an unprecedented triple promotion, and made a major at the record-breaking age of twenty-three. He had handsome features, with short and neat brown hair. He had just taken off his coveralls, and was wearing his Royal Air Force officer’s uniform. It consisted of a pair of well-cut black pants, a button-up shirt with a tie, and a long jacket. There was a belt around his waist, but no pouches or holsters.

“Sorry. We’d get a lot of curious stares if we’d stayed outside.”

Allison, Wil, and Benedict were inside one of the dome-shaped tents. They were sitting around a round table by the pole in the middle of the tent. This was Benedict’s personal quarters, furnished with a thick mat, a camp bed, a lamp, and a wooden coat rack from which three people’s worth of jackets were hanging. Light gently seeped in from the outside.

“Please excuse me, sir! I’ve brought the tea!”

The door opened with a resounding voice. A young female soldier entered, holding a tray. She nervously placed three metal mugs onto the table and saluted.

“Thank you.” Benedict said kindly. The woman responded immediately, as though having waited for this moment.

“M-Major! I, umm… I admire you greatly as a soldier of Sou Be-Il, sir! I-if you could one day take me out on an a-a-aero—…”

Tongue-twisted and desperate, the soldier could not finish her sentence. She ran from the tent, her face beet red.

“P-p-p-please excuse me!”

“Just another day on the base.” Benedict sighed, picking up his mug.

“Well, you *are* the most eligible bachelor in Sou Be-Il right now. Thanks for the tea.” Allison said, raising her mug. Benedict chuckled wryly. He turned to Wil.

“Drink up. Allison explained everything when I went to visit the Roxchean camp. She didn’t tell you a thing until you arrived, huh?”

“Yes. I was surprised, to say the least. Oh, and thank you for the tea.” Wil said, picking up the last mug.

“Anyway, I’m very happy to see you again. It brings back memories, being here with you two. What we saw then… was truly a beautiful sight. I’d like to go back and see it again. The three of us, together.”

“Me too.”

“Yes.”

Allison and Wil replied in unison. They said nothing afterward.

Several seconds later, Benedict broke the silence.

“Cheers.”

Outside, the Sou Be-Il soldiers were surrounding the tent from the distance, engaged in a heated debate about the two visitors—especially the identity of the blond-haired girl.

One young corporal theorized that the girl was the daughter of a spy dispatched to the Roxchean military by orders of the king, and that the feeble-looking boy was her subordinate. He conjectured that they were there to divulge secret information concerning the Roxchean military to Major Carr, the hero who had met the king in person, and that this was the reason the major had so suddenly joined the joint training session.

“You’re an idiot.” Said his friend.

Inside the tent, Benedict took a sip of tea.

“That’s how I forced my way into this joint training session. I’m glad we got to spend some time together like this. And since we’ll have more opportunities to work together now, I hope I’ll be able to see the two of you as often as I can.”

“We’re both struggling desperately to survive, aren’t we?”

"We certainly are."

Wil, who had been listening to Allison and Benedict quietly, spoke up.

"Have they started to downsize the military in Sou Be-Il, too?"

Benedict nodded.

"That's right. Although I can't say just how much we'll be downsizing. The air force is the biggest strain on military resources, so it'll be first up on the chopping block. Soldiers and airline industry officials who're against the cuts are saying that there's a lot of untapped potential in aeroplanes. And these air rescue training sessions are perfect for showcasing the possibilities, especially since they're about saving lives. That's why we're cooperating with the Roxche Air Force, who're on the same boat as we are, and doing whatever we can to show that, yes, we can search for and rescue people even in these cold and frozen conditions. The units that participated in the training session are made up of the best of the best. Soldiers in excellent standing and the best pilots in the force. It's like a demonstration crew. Just like how dogs desperately do tricks so that their masters won't abandon them. 'Look at what we can do!'."

"When the quick rabbit is hunted, the hound joins the stew." Wil said. Benedict nodded.

"What does that mean?" Allison asked.

"It's an old saying in Sou Be-Il," Wil explained. "When the rabbit's been hunted, the hound becomes useless, so the hunter cooks it too. It means that when there's no longer an enemy to fight, the military is no longer necessary."

"I see. I'm smack-dab in the middle of that. If I get fired, I might never get to fly an aeroplane again, let alone a fighter craft. I won't have anywhere to go."

"You never know, Allison. The main mode of long-distance transportation might shift from trains to aeroplanes. And one day, we might have passenger aeroplanes flying between Roxche and Sou Be-Il, not just freight planes. Then there'll be more jobs for pilots… probably."

"'Probably', huh."

"It's unfortunate, but it's impossible to have an unfailingly optimistic outlook on the future. And you know who has it worse than we do? People making money in the weapons industry." Benedict said.

"The war's finally over, but things are still looking pretty grim." Allison said.

"You're right. Reality is cruel." Benedict said, but continued. "But—I think the two of you are very special cases, even in Roxche. And I'm very glad that I don't have to be pointing a gun at you anymore."

"Saying that, I want to ask you to my country Sou Be-Il someday." Benedict said suddenly in Roxchean.

Allison and Wil looked up. Benedict continued.

"I want—er, I *hope* you will come to capital of the West, Sfrestus someday. The sun falling to a sea is very beautiful."

Benedict sighed with a bitter chuckle. He then added in Bezelese.

"The mandatory education we pilots receive just didn't feel like enough, so I'm diligently taking Roxchean lessons from a private tutor. But it's not working so well, it seems. I still have a long way to go until I'm as fluent as the two of you."

"You've gotten so much better than when you first came up to talk to me." Allison said. Benedict waved his hands, embarrassed.

"It's a lot easier to listen than to speak. I can get the gist of most everything people say now. And I could communicate somewhat with the Roxchean officers I met, too."

"Your Roxchean is very good. Please come over sometime. We'll show you the sun and the moon rising over the sea." Allison said in Roxchean. Wil nodded.

"Please come visit us."

"I understand. I will go visit you." Benedict replied in Roxchean, smiling.

"Drop by again on the way back. I'd like to go for dinner in town, the three of us, if we can. There's a party with the Roxchean officers tonight, and all the high-ranking officers are out already. It'll be a lot better than eating alone."

Allison's car was parked in front of the gate, at the far end of the camp. Allison and Benedict were standing next to the driver's seat.

Benedict was wearing a dark grey coat and an Air Force hat. Wil was sitting in the passenger seat.

A thin cloud cover dampened the light and shaded them from the blinding sun.

"You're not going to the party?" Allison asked, surprised.

"I forced myself out of it. I hate hanging with the bigwigs." Benedict said easily. Allison chuckled.

"That's pretty cool. Okay—I promise we'll come by on the way back."

"The meteorology team says it'll be perfectly clear today and tomorrow. You won't have to worry about whiteout conditions." Benedict said.

"I see. So we're good for tomorrow, too…" Allison said quietly, so only Benedict could hear.

"?"

Though confused at first, Benedict quickly nodded, having understood what she meant.

"Yes, tomorrow will be fine, too. Probably. Feel free to visit anytime."

Benedict put his right index and middle fingers together and saluted her casually. It was a Sou Be-Il gesture for wishing someone luck.

“Thank you, Benedict. And you know, you’re not—” Allison said, looking him in the eye.

“It’s all right, Allison. I was the underhanded one.” Benedict said with a smile, cutting her off. He laughed softly—with a hint of self-deprecation.

“But that’s not the reason, okay?” Allison said firmly, and raised her voice. “See you later!”

She opened the roof and stepped into the car. Benedict leaned in toward the window.

“Take care. Have fun, you two.”

“Thank you.” Allison replied, putting on her sunglasses.

Wil said goodbye to Benedict from the passenger seat. Benedict waved at him as well. Allison zipped the roof shut and started the car. Benedict watched as it raced off into the distance. When a gust of wind scattered the cloud cover, the field of ice regained its brilliant shine. Benedict had to narrow his eyes.

As he watched, the car drove toward the northwest, where the peaks around the hollow were the largest. The car grew smaller and smaller, until it eventually disappeared in the snow kicked up in its wake.

“The first to shoot takes the kill. A loss is a loss.” Benedict whispered to himself.

Chapter 3: Fiona's Valley

"Since we've got a car, what do you say to getting tea at one of the villages across the lake? Let's enjoy the view."

The car was driving over the frozen lake. Allison, still wearing her sunglasses, addressed Wil, who was wearing his goggles. She was still speaking in Bezelese, perhaps because of their conversation with Benedict earlier.

"I'd love to, but there's a bit of a problem. I didn't get the chance to tell you earlier." Wil replied, also in Bezelese. The conversation naturally continued in that language.

"What is it?" Allison asked.

"Well… I don't have a lot of money on me right now." Wil said apologetically. "I wasn't planning to go shopping today, so I left the money in the hotel safe. All I have is some loose change to use for telephone calls."

Allison chuckled.

"I love how thoughtful you are, Wil. Don't worry about the money—I have enough. The payout from this training session was pretty good." Allison said, gently tapping her bag.

"You… made money from the training session?" Wil asked curiously.

Allison boldly took her eyes off the road, meeting Wil's gaze.

"That's right. Our whole unit teamed up and stuffed our luggage full of canned caviar."

"…Caviar?"

"Right before this training session, we were on standby at the base by Lure River. The exact location's a military secret, but what's the first specialty that comes to mind when you think of Lure River?"

"Caviar."

"Exactly. Caviar's relatively cheap because the base is in the mountains. We bought a load of caviar straight from the producers, and shipped them on our aeroplanes as personal belongings. Then we sold them in Iks. It was a pretty big haul."

"…"

"For your information, our unit went out yesterday and bought a load of gold accessories. We'll be sneaking them to the capital to sell for a profit. We already looked into a place that'll give us a really good deal."

"So… uh… this would be… smuggling." Wil said hesitantly. Allison shrugged without a care.

"Our unit calls it 'independent and invaluable experimentation for the research of freight transport via aeroplane'."

"Huh… right."

The mountain winds on the frozen lake slowly grew stronger.

But it was difficult to sense that change from inside a moving car. Soon, the wind had grown strong enough to blow away the snow piled on the ice.

“Whoa!”

“What?”

Allison and Wil’s field of vision blanked out instantly. Allison took her foot off the gas pedal and stopped the car, but the roof continued to rattle. At times, the frame of the car itself shook. Furious gusts scattered the snow on the lake, making it impossible to see.

“Urgh…” Allison groaned. “So much for the meteorology team!”

“The area’s prone to quick shifts in the weather. But in any case… this is really something else.”

Wil lowered his goggled slightly and looked out at the blowing snow with wonder.

“What do you want to do, Allison? The wind might let up soon. Should we wait?”

Allison thought for several seconds in the stranded car.

“Let’s do this: instead of waiting for the wind to stop, let’s get to the nearest village we can find, even if we don’t make it across the lake. Unfortunately for us, we can’t trust the heating in this car.”

“But will we be all right, just barging into any old village? I heard that some people in the countryside don’t trust outlanders.”

Allison reacted, surprisingly animated.

“Oh? But Iks is part of Roxche, and I’m part of the military that defends it. And you’re an innocent civilian, Wil. Why wouldn’t it be all right? Let’s head north. Once we reach the shore, we’ll either turn left or right and go into the first village we see.”

“All right.”

“Let’s go.”

Keeping an eye on the compass in the car, Allison slowly drove northward. The lone windshield wiper squeaked from one end of their vision to the other.

At points along their drive, the wind weakened momentarily and cleared their view—seconds later, it began to howl again, blinding them. Snowflakes rushed inside through the gap between the roof and the frame.

“Listen to that wind. If the engine gives out, we’ll be stranded and helpless.” Allison said, sounding rather amused.

“I’d prefer if that didn’t happen.” Wil replied.

Eventually, Allison stepped on the brake pedal and brought the car to a stop. Wil looked ahead. To his shock, he spotted a steep slope covered in coniferous trees through the slightly weakened snowstorm. They were right next to the lakeshore.

"Your eyesight really is amazing."

The road that ran along the shore was left covered in snow, as it had no use during the winter anyway.

"We're here. So which way? Left or right? Although it probably won't make much of a difference either way."

"It's up to you. But make sure you go along the shore, so we won't lose our way."

Allison agreed, and thought for two seconds.

"It's decided! We'll go the opposite direction from the one we went last time."

She turned the steering wheel.

"Okay." Wil said.

He then added,

"Wait. 'Last time'?"

* * *

After seeing off Allison and Wil, Benedict returned to his tent, hung up his hat and coat, and took a seat.

Their empty mugs had already been taken away, and the table had been wiped clean. Benedict filled out his flight log and put it into his bag.

Pieces of furniture set up all over the large tent, and the man sitting aimlessly amidst it all.

"…"

Benedict looked down at the watch on his left wrist. Also known as a chronograph, it was a pilot's wristwatch with a large face, also equipped with a stopwatch function.

He looked up at the ceiling.

"Ahem… today I now have no schedules. I have no work to do. I would have brought my Roxchean textbook."

He looked at the gaps outside and mumbled to himself.

"Er… *should* have."

He looked down and corrected himself.

"I now have no schedules. I lost already, so I think it would have been better to stop trying to show off and be honest, to go to have tea in town with them."

Benedict stood. He put on his coat, grabbed his hat, and stepped outside. Once he did, he followed regulations and put on his hat.

A female officer happened to be passing by the tent. She was carrying a thermos, probably on her way back from delivering warm drinks to her fellow soldiers.

The instant she spotted Benedict, she saluted him and began to follow at his side. And without even being prompted, she introduced herself in great detail. She did not fail to mention the fact that she was two years his junior. She went on to praise him for the discovery of the mural, thank him for participating in the joint training session, comment boldly yet honestly that he was much more handsome in person, report for no apparent reason that she was still single, explain the personal details of her ideal future in finding a husband in the military, insist that it was not a bad thing to think seriously of meetings brought on by coincidence, and—

"Excuse me." Benedict said, disappearing into a tent labeled 'Officers - Men's room'.

Having lost her prey, the female officer flared her nostrils as though thinking, 'This isn't over yet—you're not getting away from me'. She stalked past the tent two or three times before finally departing.

Lining the interior of the tent were pipes and sprinklers half-buried in the snow.

"It is very easy to shoot down targets that are coming to be shot down. But that is not very fun. That is not my way."

Major Carr Benedict mumbled to himself in Roxchean in the deserted lavatory.

Wearing a pair of reading glasses, Benedict sat in his tent with a book in hand. On the cover was the title 'Ideas for Great Baby Names'. He flipped through the pages rapidly, yawning on occasion.

Suddenly, a gust of wind shook the tent. Snow scattered down from the roof. Benedict put down the book and his glasses, and stepped onto his chair. Then, he unknotted and pulled on a string tied to the pole in the middle. A cover came over the gap in the roof. Benedict tied the string again to secure it.

He put on his coat and stepped outside. Powerful winds buffeted the snow, creating complete whiteout conditions. Benedict looked on at the blankness for some time.

"This might be a good opportunity to play hooky…"

Pressing his hat over his head to keep it from flying away, and ignoring the snow piling onto his coat, Benedict inched his way to the next tent over in nearly zero visibility. He then headed to the next tent, carefully making sure of his heading.

When he finally entered another dome-shaped tent, shaking off the snow from his coat, the bespectacled captain who had guided Allison and Wil quickly stood and saluted him.

“Come in, Major!”

A second lieutenant and several first lieutenants, who were drinking tea around the stove, got to their feet as well. On their chests were bird-shaped badges that identified them as pilots.

“At ease, Captain. There was something I wanted to ask you.” Benedict said, saluting back. Everyone but the captain returned to their seats, slightly nervous. They looked at Benedict with a mix of pure admiration and detached wonder—as though he were from another world altogether.

The captain, who was older than Benedict but subordinate in rank, spoke to him with deference.

“I suppose it wasn’t a very fun read after all, sir. Apologies, but that’s the only book I brought this time.”

“It’s not about the book, actually. And it was an interesting read in its own right. Although it’ll probably be a long time before I need all that information.” Benedict said. “Let me get to the point. The wind’s picked up quite a bit.”

“It has, sir. Meteorology’s no help in these parts. We might be in for a snowstorm tonight.”

“There’s nothing we can do about that. It’s not possible to get perfectly accurate forecasts. But back to the point.”

“Yes, Major?”

“If I were to leave the camp, would you take care of the rest?”

“Sir?”

The captain was confused. Benedict continued.

“I’m afraid my two friends from earlier might have gotten lost in the snowsquall. I’d like to go look for them.”

“They’ll be all right, sir. Since they headed north, they’ll have reached the lakeshore—”

The captain stopped mid-sentence. He remembered how Benedict had come all this way earlier to borrow a book he wasn’t even interested in.

“…If you’d keep this quiet from the others, sir. The higher-ranking officers won’t be coming back from the party until tomorrow evening. No one here will make a fuss if you happened to be away, Major.” He whispered.

The Sou Be-Il Air Force Base’s inspection point was being buffeted by snow.

It was there that a rather unusual vehicle was being prepared.

The frame was one meter in height and three meters in length, and was made of wood. On the left side was a door, and tiny windows were built into the front and either side. On the

round hole in the roof was a swivel window for blocking the wind. The vehicle was painted completely white to blend in with the snow, but the roof was a bright orange.

Ski dampers with their springs exposed were fixed to the thick shafts jutting from the front and back of the vehicle. The skis were 2.5 meters in length and 40 centimeters wide. Four of them were supporting the frame, which was suspended above the ground.

There was a shining black engine at the back of the frame. It was an air-cooled engine used in aeroplanes, surrounded by five cylinders. And at the very back were two large propellers, just like an aeroplane's.

"This is my first time driving an aerosan." Benedict said, standing next to the vehicle in his coat. He was not wearing his uniform cap, but a fur-lined winter hat. He was also wearing his goggles and gloves.

An aerosan was a propeller-driven sled. It was a vehicle developed for high-speed travel on snow and ice, and boasted a longer history than the snowmobile, which combined the use of skis and caterpillar tracks.

The aerosan in front of Benedict was a small two-seater. Normally, the driver would take the front seat and a soldier would stand in the back seat, where a machine gun was equipped. At this point, of course, the machine gun had been removed for the joint search-and-rescue training. The joint training was also the reason the roof had been painted orange.

On the side of the frame were the perfunctory words 'Confederation Air Force'. This aerosan was originally made in Roxche, and it was one of three that the Sou Be-Il Air Force had borrowed for the training session.

"It's much easier than it looks. Think of it as similar to taxiing an aeroplane. I'm sure you'll get used to it in no time, Major." Said a middle-aged sergeant first class as he taught Benedict how to operate the aerosan.

Similarly to a car, the aerosan had pedals and a round steering wheel. The center pedal was the gas pedal—pressing down on it increased the rotation speed of the propellers. The pedals on the right and left were brakes for the front skis and the rear skis respectively. When the steering wheel was turned, the front skis turned in the same direction and the rear skis in the opposite direction.

"Simple, isn't it? You'll get used to the rest as you drive, sir. We also have translated manuals in the toolkit in the back, just in case. That is all, Major."

Benedict thanked the sergeant first class.

"Major Carr. Take this." Said the captain. The sergeant first class handed Benedict a white case.

It looked like a cushioned case for an instrument, seventy centimeters long and forty centimeters wide. Attached to it was a leather shoulder strap and a handle. Inside was the submachine gun that the soldier had been holding until just now.

"Just in case, sir. Roxche has also permitted officers to carry firearms."

Benedict tried to refuse.

“Sir, we’ve received warnings that bears and wolves that have failed to hibernate roam the region in this season.” The sergeant first class said. In the end, Benedict had no choice. He took up the case and put it in the shelf of the aerosan so it would not fall out.

The captain offered him a map, but Benedict replied that he had the gist of it memorized, and that he did not want to risk losing such valuable documents they borrowed from Roxche.

“And there’s no guarantee that those maps are accurate. We leave intentional errors in the maps for the border areas as well. Marks for villages and marshes that don’t exist, or the other way around.”

“That’s true. We’ve also got some hand-copied maps, if you’d like.”

“Actually, do you have a piece of paper I can take notes on?” Benedict asked.

“Plenty, sir. We found some advertisements for a film in town earlier—souvenirs to take back home.”

With an embarrassed look, the sergeant first class took out a twice-folded piece of paper from his pocket. Benedict unfolded it and found a picture of a suit-clad man.

“…”

Ignoring the fact that it was not an advertisement for a film, Benedict checked that the back of the poster was blank, thanked the sergeant first class, and tucked it into his pocket.

“I’ll probably be back before sundown.” Benedict said.

“Please be back by tomorrow evening at the latest, sir. Take your time.” The captain replied.

“…You don’t have to be so blunt about it…”

“Take care, Major.”

Shaking the snow off his head and shoulders, Benedict climbed into the aerosan. Sitting in the passenger seat, he called in a loud voice.

“I’m starting the engine! Watch out for the propellers!”

He looked out through the hole on the side. The sergeant first class signaled him with a thumbs-up and a wave. Benedict pressed down on the brake pedals with his feet and pressed the ignition switch.

The aerosan began to rumble. With a roar, the engine came to life. At the same time, the propellers began to spin and scatter snow behind them.

When Benedict took his feet off the brakes, the aerosan slowly began to move.

As the aerosan departed, its engines still warming up, the captain muttered.

“Phew… That’ll take the pressure off the soldiers and pilots. Though I suppose the women won’t be as happy.”

"It's certainly uncomfortable being around a celebrity, sir. Although I can't tell how the major thinks of his situation." The sergeant first class agreed. He then added, "I'd never want to end up that way, personally. It's a shame for him."

The captain nodded and wiped the snow from his glasses with a gloved hand.

"There's no one in the world who doesn't know his face. He'll never be able to live a normal life now. It's a lonesome thing, I'd wager."

* * *

"This *must* be the entrance to one of the valleys." Allison repeated.

"Probably…" Wil answered.

Their car was on a concrete ramp, which was used in the summer to lower boats into the lake. About thirty meters ahead of them was the snow-covered road. Although the weather made it difficult to see far ahead, the forests on the mountain ridges on either side were visible—but there was nothing of the sort directly ahead.

"If we keep going in this direction, we'll find a village. It doesn't look like the snow is piled up quite as high over there, so we might find some cleared roads up ahead. …Man, that was a lot of effort."

Wil looked out through the windshield. A narrow valley seemed to lead into an endless world of white, veiled by the snowsquall.

"There's something eerie about that valley."

"C'mon, Wil. Don't worry. You have me!"

Allison energetically started the car, driving up the ramp and into the valley. The wheels occasionally drove into the snow, but the chains were enough to propel the car forward smoothly.

"The wind's gotten weaker." Wil commented. Visibility was improving.

"It's because we're in the valley now. But it's dangerous in the air overhead—I can guarantee that there's some crazy turbulence up there right now."

Wil nodded. Little by little, their field of vision grew wider.

The valley was tucked in between the snow and the woods. The car slowly drove into the narrow space, a world away from the wide-open lake from before. The road snaked left and right in a gentle upward slope. The only sign that the ground, covered in nothing but fresh snow, was a path, were the tree trunks standing at regular intervals. Round boulders wearing hats of snow lay by the little creek to their right.

The car slowly proceeded forward. Soon, four rectangular ponds appeared between the road and the creek. The artificial ponds, surrounded by wooden fences, were dug deep so they would not freeze. Water from the creek circulated through them. The ponds were a small

fish farm, filled with countless squirming fish. Next to them was a small shed, nearly crushed under the weight of fallen snow.

Soon, the howling winds came to a sudden stop.

"What?"

"Wow…"

Allison and Wil exclaimed at once. Blue skies unfolded overhead as the scenery around them came into clear view. They could see a village just ahead of a curve.

At its widest, the valley spanned a distance of about three hundred meters. Inside was a plain wider and flatter than the valley entrance. The land was sloped slightly, ascending toward the far end of the valley, and in the middle flowed a small creek.

The road ran through the center of the valley, parallel to the creek. And before the side roads branching from it stood several houses. Most were similar in construction—rectangular single-story buildings with chimneys sticking out the middle. Unlike the city, however, the roofs here were painted brown. The edges of the roofs jutted out at length, supported by slanted columns to prevent the weight of the snow from damaging the roofs and windows. Next to the houses were enclosures for livestock, sheds for storing firewood, and granaries.

There was a large distance between one house and the next. The homes were scattered, some even dozens of meters from the nearest neighbor. In the midst of it all was one point where several houses were clustered together around the main street. There stood a large stone steeple that overlooked the entire village.

The slopes to either side of the village were covered in trees. They were deep and dense groves, about thirty meters wide. With the village nestled inside, the woods reached all the way into the valley. The woods were there to prevent avalanches, having been left to grow for many years.

The patches of land between the houses were farming fields, all completely covered in snow. Trees grew in straight lines along the boundaries. There were yet more houses further into the valley, and deeper still was a snow-covered pasture. The pasture eventually gave way to a coniferous forest. Beyond rose the magnificent peaks of the Central Mountain Range, all against the backdrop of the clear blue sky.

Stopping the car, Allison and Wil opened the roof and stepped outside. They stood on either side of the car. Finally free from the cramped seats, they stretched out as their breaths rose in puffs of white.

"Not bad at all. It's your quintessential mountain village. I bet it's really nice during the summer." Allison said, leaning on the car with a hand on her waist.

Wil took off his goggles and put them around his neck. He then pulled down his hat to cover his ears.

"It's already quite nice. I'm really glad we came here—I would never have been able to see places like this if I stuck with the class. It's all thanks to you, Allison. I'm really grateful." Wil said, looking Allison in the eye. His face was reflected in her sunglasses. A smile spread underneath.

“You don’t need to thank me, Wil. I’ll be dragging you around everywhere from now on.”

“What time is it now?”

Allison looked up at the sky, then down at her wristwatch.

“It’s precisely afternoon teatime. Let’s go!”

They climbed back into the car. Allison enthusiastically started the engine.

They did not even make it twenty meters ahead.

Their right wheel suddenly sank into the snow. The car stopped on the road at a slant.

The nearest house to the valley entrance was just by the roadside. The flimsy wooden door of the firewood shed by the house opened, and a middle-aged woman stepped outside.

She was probably just over forty—plump to put it nicely, and fat to be blunt. She was dressed just like the other women of Iks, with a shawl over her head as well. And because she was busy at work, she was also wearing a slightly dirty apron. She was carrying a wooden pail with a rag draped over the side.

“What the heck was that?!”

“There must have been a hole or a ditch on the roadside. We probably couldn’t see it because of the snow.”

“Ugh! They should keep their roads in better shape.”

“We’re not going to pull the car out of there on our own.”

“I’ve had it! Is someone out to get in our way or something?!”

“Who knows?”

Allison and Wil trudged through the snow, raising their voices. Wil’s goggles were atop his hat. Allison was wearing her sunglasses, with her bag around her waist. She had tied back her long blond hair and pulled it out of her coat.

The middle-aged woman, who had been watching at them in bemusement, soon put down her pail and waved at the two. They looked at her.

The woman cheerfully trotted over across the snow.

“My, my.”

She smiled at Allison and Wil, looking unusually happy, and repeated herself.

“My, my.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” Wil said in Roxchean, finally switching over from Bezelese. Allison held back her frustration and greeted the woman as well.

"It's very nice to meet you. It's not every day we get visitors in a mountain village like this. Where do you come from? And my goodness! It's my first time seeing someone with blond hair. That *is* natural, isn't it? It's really very beautiful. And your sunglasses are quite lovely, too. Are you an heiress, by any chance? I'm—"

"Um…"

Wil cut off the woman, who looked energetic enough for a three-day conversation.

"Um… we're tourists from the lowland. We came from across the lake—from Mushke. Would it be all right, by any chance, to get some rest here and look around the village?"

"Oh my! Of course. You're welcome to look around. Thank you for coming all this way."

"Oh… Er, our car is stuck, too." Wil said, pointing out the car about two hundred meters away.

"My, I'm glad you weren't hurt. I'll call the young men later and ask them to help you dig it out."

Her frustration largely resolved, Allison turned to the woman.

"Is there anywhere here we could sit down for a quiet cup of tea?"

The woman thought for a moment.

"There aren't any shops here, like in the city. But you should try the village hall—that's where we go to rest. There should be an old lady there watching the building."

She pointed to the steeple, under which stood the village hall. She also promised that once the village men returned, she would send them to the hall to meet Allison and Wil.

Allison's anger abated. She and Wil thanked the woman and began to trudge through the snow once more.

The woman saw them off with a smile and a wave. She then picked up her pail and returned to her house without a care in the world.

Once she was inside, the woman put down the pail and sprinted all the way across the room. Snow fell from her shoes and scattered all over the floor. She then rushed down a flight of stairs that led to the stone-walled basement.

The light from a window high up in the basement dimly lit the room.

The woman went to a wooden box on the wall in a corner of the room. Inside was a large brass trumpet, which was connected to the wall and a pipe. The woman took up a small whistle hanging next to the box, and blew it into the trumpet. The sound carried into the pipe. It was a voicepipe, just like the mechanism often used on ships.

The moment she hung up the whistle again, another whistle came screeching through the pipe. Alongside it came—

<What is it? Over.>

It was the tense voice of a middle-aged woman. The first woman looked into the trumpet, clearly rattled.

"Outlanders. Two young people—a girl with blond hair and a boy. The girl is dressed like a soldier, but doesn't seem to be one. They claim to be tourists from the lowlands. Their car has been caught in the trap at the village entrance. They claimed they wanted to have some tea, so I sent them to the village hall. Over."

She uttered mechanically into the trumpet as though giving a report. There was a moment of silence.

<I see them. If they really are tourists, find an excuse and send them back. Is there anything I should note? Over.>

In the dark basement, the woman spoke into the trumpet.

"Yes. Both speak fluent Bezelese. Over."

Another moment of silence. The response sounded even more nervous.

<The elder is out. What should I do? Over.>

"If we wait until something happens, it'll be too late. We have to keep them here until everyone gets back. Over."

<Understood. I'll send word to the mountains. Over.>

"I'll get back to monitoring the outsiders. I'll also hide the car and cover up the tire tracks. Send anyone who can help right now. Let everyone know. That is all. Over."

<I will. Over.>

The woman closed the lid of the box and reached for a rifle leaning haphazardly next to it. She took it in her hands, picked up a box of ammunition, and began to load the rifle at the desk.

There were about ten more rifles arranged neatly in the basement. The crisp sound of ammunition being loaded disturbed the silence of the room.

On the first floor of the village hall was a large room.

The first room they saw when they entered was long and rectangular. Inside was a large table made with thick logs cut lengthwise, as though to match. The legs of the table firmly supported a thick board, which made up a surface so large that over twenty people could sit around it.

At points along the stone walls were little alcoves for lamps. There were wooden shelves on the wall also, showcasing plates adorned with beautiful pictures, some dried flowers, and framed portraits. The light seeping in from the glass windows filled the room with soft, gentle warmth.

“This place is beautiful. I like it.” Allison said to Wil, who was next to her on the bench. They were sitting at the edge of the table, next to the window. Allison had taken off her jacket and was wearing just her coveralls. Wil had also taken off his jacket and hat.

“I’m surprised they were so kind to us, even though we dropped in out of nowhere.”

“I told you we didn’t have to worry.”

A rotating door opened, and an elderly woman stepped in from another room. She was extremely old—her face was all wrinkles, and her back was arched. But her gait was steady and unflinching.

“Here. Have some tea.”

She was carrying a platter, on which were a steaming ceramic pot and two teacups.

“We’re just a little countryside village, so I’m afraid this is all we can do for you. But everyone does love my tea. I made it with the herbs I picked in the mountain during the spring. I hope it’s to your liking.”

The woman smiled, cheerfully pouring tea for the apologetic Wil and Allison.

They thanked her and picked up their cups. Allison checked the temperature before taking a sip. She had no complaints about the flavor.

Wil did not drink.

“I’m not very good with hot drinks.” Wil said, noticing the woman’s anxious gaze. He turned his sights to the ornaments decorating the walls.

“Excuse me, but…” Wil turned to the woman, pointing at a certain direction.

Allison and the woman followed his finger. There was a shelf high up on the wall, upon which were three wooden plates—or small platters—displayed side-by-side. They were in a rather inconspicuous position in the room, and would not have been noticed at a cursory glance.

Ornate designs were carved into each of them. On the plate on the left was a bunch of grapes, each and every fruit plump and appetizing. On the middle plate was a bird with its wings spread majestically. And on the plate on the right was a flower with long petals, its head bowing to the right.

“Are those the crests of Iks’s royal family?” Wil wondered. The woman’s eyes widened.

“Oh my… I’m surprised you knew.”

Allison continued sipping her tea, looking at Wil as though urging him to continue.

“I did some research about Iks before I came here. I read that, instead of publicizing portraits of members of the Royal Family, each member has a crest with the image of an animal or a plant. And that the people of this country look upon the crests with reverence they would give to the Royal Family. That’s how I concluded that those must be the royal crests.”

“That’s correct. The one on the left belongs to Her Majesty, the one in the middle to His Highness, and the one on the right belongs to their daughter, the princess. Unfortunately, they passed away in a fire ten years ago. Such an awful tragedy.”

Wil began to take sips of his slowly-cooling tea.

“This is delicious. Thank you for your hospitality.” He said, swallowing. The old woman nodded satisfactorily.

“But you see, we still admire and respect the Royal Family. We truly love them. Even today, we consider ourselves their subjects—we could give our lives for them, and do even the most horrible things for their sake.”

Wil and Allison were at a loss for words. The woman smiled.

“Well, I’ll be inside. Take your time and relax.” She said, leaving the room with the platter under her arm.

Wil looked up at the three crests.

“A bunch of grapes, a hawk, and… what is that flower? I’ll have to look into it later.” Wil mumbled, fascinated.

“Right.” Allison sighed, completely uninterested. Wil turned.

“Maybe I’ll write my report on this. The teacher might be surprised.”

“Right.”

“I’ll have to borrow ‘Flora Unique to the Mountain Regions’ from the teacher later. I can’t wait to see what the princess’s crest means.” He said enthusiastically. Allison grinned.

“A crest, huh. So it’s just like me and my eel.”

“I think it’s a little different…”

“Really?”

“Aah, this is great. It’s so relaxing here.” Allison mumbled, sitting in a corner of the empty room with Wil. She picked up her teacup and leaned against the stone wall.

“Say, Wil.”

“Yeah?” Wil replied, his gaze fixed ahead.

“What are you going to do after you graduate?”

“What?”

This time, he turned. Allison was still leaning against the wall, her eyes very slightly turned to Wil on her right.

Wil looked into her blue eyes as he answered.

"I don't know. I'm sure by this time next year, I'll have to start a new life. I don't know if I'll keep getting a scholarship from Raputoa to go to university there, or if I'll take the entrance examination to Confederation Capital University—"

"Of *course* you're going to Capital U!" Allison declared, getting to her feet. "You said before, didn't you? Their faculty is talented, they have a big library, and the students are really smart. It'll be best for you to study under the best conditions possible, right? Anyone would want to."

"You're right, but that might be difficult. I can't graduate until this time next year, which means I'll have to take the entrance examination afterwards, and I'll have to start going to classes in the fall term at the earliest. If I want to do that, I'll have to find a place to live in the Capital District until then. I'll have to work to pay for rent and living costs, while studying at the same time—" Wil said, stifling a yawn. "It would be great if I made it into Capital U, but if I didn't… it'd be all over. I've been thinking recently that I might as well get a recommendation and go to Raputoa University instead."

Allison mumbled, disappointed. They were both silent for a time.

The stone-walled room in the valley of snow was so quiet that even the tiniest, softest of noises buzzed in their ears.

Allison broke the silence.

"But still… I wish you could go to the best school there is, Wil. …Say, I'm going to be flying around all the time, but I actually have to live in the Capital District, since that's where headquarters is. And I could always request to be transferred to a unit in the Capital District, and… And, you know? I thought it might be nice if I could rent an apartment for myself. And *if* I do that, I think it'll be best if someone was around to watch the house while I was off on missions. N-not that I'm looking for a housekeeper, but…"

Her head slightly bowed, Allison tightly held her nearly-empty teacup as she gazed into the ripples on the surface.

"So… umm… I'm not saying this just because I think it'll be convenient, but…"

Ten seconds of silence later,

"After you finish secondary school, do you want to get an apartment together in the Capital District together with me?" Allison finally asked, her eyes still on the ripples. She ended up saying 'together' twice.

There was another moment of silence. Allison downed the rest of her tea in one go.

"Wh-what do you say?"

Another moment of silence.

"Wil?"

Allison hesitantly turned.

"Huh?"

Wil was leaning on the wall.

"Hello?"

Wil's eyes and mouth were closed. his head was bowed slightly, and his shoulders rose and fell at regular intervals. He was asleep.

"Hey! Wil!" Allison cried.

Immediately, she frowned and shook her head. Her long blond hair fluttered. Allison put down her teacup and placed her elbows on the table. She pressed down on the edge of her eye with her right hand as her eyes closed. She quickly opened them again.

"It can't be… this tea—"

Alison glared at the teacup. Her upper body slowly collapsed against her will over her left arm.

Thud.

As she fell to the table, her forehead hit the surface. Her golden hair slid down from her left shoulder.

The sound of Allison's soft snoring filled the room.

* * *

"Oh my! Look, everyone! It's the Hero of the Mural! Look!"

The aerosan was surrounded by people.

There was a large valley by the lake, under the clear blue sky. Houses were clustered together a little ways in, and in front was a pier lined with boats pulled up from the lake. The aerosan was parked there, and Benedict stood next to it.

And all around him were about twenty residents of this particular valley. The number of shrill-voiced women was only continuing to increase. When someone who didn't recognize Benedict asked another person, he immediately received an answer: "You've got to be kidding me! This is the pilot from Cross-Mountain who found the mural!".

"Er… Hello." Benedict said in Roxchean. He was immediately bombarded with questions asking what he was doing here, if it really was him, or if he had a girlfriend.

It might have been a good idea to stay put, but Benedict wavered as he wondered which question to answer first, and without thinking gave the young women a small wave.

"He's so handsome!"

"Eek!"

"He's looking at me!"

“Amazing!”

“You should sleep over in the village tonight!”

“Could you give me an aeroplane ride?!”

“Oh! Me too!”

“Please?! Pretty please?!”

“Steal me away!”

A cacophony of voices cried out at once.

“Come to think of it, I heard the military was holding a training session on the lake a while ago.” A forty-something man said to the person next to him.

“Excuse me. I would like to ask a question from you.” Benedict said to the man. He asked if a young man and a young woman happened to come to the village by car during the snowsquall earlier.

“Hey, he wants to know if anyone’s seen a young couple come in by car!” The man said to the other villagers. There was a moment of silence, before everyone began to answer that they did not see anyone matching that description.

“Tough luck. If they’ve come to the village, someone should have spotted them.”

“I understand. Thank you. I am looking for the two people. Can you teach—er, tell me the name of your village?”

The man gave Benedict the name of the village. Benedict took out the poster he brought and wrote down the name of the village, marked its location with an X, and jotted down the directions he had taken to get there. He then tucked it into his pocket.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Before, I went to the village beside the east. This time, I want to go to the village beside the west. There is a possibility that they are there.”

“I see. But I personally doubt that.”

“Why do you say so?”

“See, that village hates outlanders. So nobody around here likes ‘em. I once went over to deliver a message, and this pudgy woman bolted out of her house and interrogated me until my ears fell off. Asked me why I came to the village and all that. So no one goes there, and no one from that village comes outside unless they have to. Some people even say that the village is so shady because they’re so deep in that valley.”

The other villagers nodded, expressing their agreement.

“The entrance might be a bit hard to find, so take care of yourself. But I really doubt your friends’d be having a nice cup of tea there. Probably the village across the lake, I’d wager.

It’s a big place—all the locals go there to have fun, and that’s where the timber from the area goes. They’ve got a pier, lodgings, and restaurants. If they’re a couple, they’re probably there.”

“This must be it. It certainly is difficult to find.”

Benedict’s aerosan slowly traversed the ice, the propellers spinning. From the hole in front of the narrow seat he could see the entrance of the narrow valley at the lakeshore, and the ramp in front of it. The path inside was dark and winding. He could not see a village.

“If I take the aerosan, I won’t be able to turn.” He mumbled. “Should I just walk? Or should I just turn back and call it quits? But what if they really are here? Then again, Allison’d just get angry at me even if I do find them.”

The aerosan went round and round aimlessly on the lake.

Eventually, Benedict steered it toward the valley entrance. Even after he turned off the engine, the aerosan was propelled forward for some time by inertia. Benedict hit the brakes underneath an inconspicuous tree by the entrance, stopping the aerosan.

The aerosan had no keys or security devices. Benedict turned the stopper on the drum-shaped gasoline tank that took up most of the back of the vehicle, cutting off the fuel supply. He also pulled out he battery terminal. He covered the hole in the roof with a white waterproof cloth, then tossed two strong pieces of rope over it. He then nailed down the rope deep into the ice.

“Can’t have anyone stealing this.”

Benedict took out the submachine gun case and slung it over his shoulder.

He then began to walk toward the valley.

There was a continuous trail of footsteps leading into the valley from the entrance on. They spanned a width of about two meters, hardening the path into a walkway and making it quite easy to move along. Benedict nimbly marched in. On either side of the path were deep forests, and the blue sky was beginning to cloud over.

“This place feels great. It’d be wonderful if I could buy myself a house here and live without anyone ever staring at me or asking questions.”

The glare of the sunlight against the snow was quite harsh, but Benedict took in the scenery regardless and cheerfully continued to walk.

Eventually, he spotted four black squares to his right. Artificial ponds used as a fish farm, dug by the creek.

As Benedict passed by the pond without giving it a moment’s thought,

“Wait!”

He was stopped by a sharp female voice.

Benedict turned to the direction of the voice, on his right. There was a woman standing in front of a snow-covered shed.

She was quite young, likely in her early twenties. The woman was wearing a thick green dress made up of a mosaic of fabrics, a pair of winter tights, and a pair of boots. Her tall stature and slim figure accentuated the cut of her clothes.

Her black hair was nearly shoulder-length. She had snow-white skin and dark brown eyes.

"You, with the strange clothes! What are you doing here?" She asked distrustfully. She came over to Benedict, stepping along the footprints she had made earlier.

"…"

Benedict was stunned by the woman, who approached him with clear suspicion. He could not take his eyes off her, even until she came right up to his face.

The woman looked up slightly and directly into his eyes.

"Er… hello." Benedict said in Roxchean.

"Who are you?"

"Pardon me?"

Benedict was shocked for a moment, but his surprise quickly gave was to laughter. The woman was clearly not amused.

"What's so funny?"

"N-nothing is. It was nothing."

"Answer the question. Who are you? What are you doing at our village? I don't know who you are, but we don't want any outlanders here."

Benedict slowly responded.

"Please let me introduce myself. My name is Carr Benedict. I am from Sou Be-Il, so Carr is my surname. Hello."

"So you're from Cross-Mountain…"

The woman looked even more dubious than before. But Benedict continued undeterred.

"Please do not be alarmed. I am from Sou Be-Il, but I received… er… *permission* from Roxche to work here. I did not do anything bad."

"Then who gave you permission to come to our village? Please leave now."

The woman was finished. She turned and headed for the village. Benedict followed her without a moment's hesitation, keeping pace next to her. Because the woman was taking the middle of the footpath, Benedict had no choice but to struggle through the soft snow.

"I am sorry for making you surprised. Er, would you like to drink tea with me? I am not asking you to drink tea with me because I want to apologize. I will buy tea. I will tell you many things as we drink tea so that you will not be bored. I have many fun stories to tell you."

"I'm not interested in endlessly listening to your awful Roxchean."

"Er, I…"

Benedict desperately tried to continue the conversation, but he eventually shook his head in frustration.

"I am more smooth in my native tongue."

"Ugh. Please. Everyone knows women hate tenacious men. Don't follow me any more. This is our village, and we don't like outlanders."

The woman's tone was cold as ice. Benedict slowed down.

"I am sorry. I did it because it has been a long time since I talked a conversation like this. It was very fun." He said with a smile. The woman glanced dubiously at him. Then, she looked forward again and expertly walked down the snowy road. Benedict did not follow.

"Oh! Wait!"

Benedict stopped as he made to return to the aerosan, quickly running after the slender woman.

"Please, wait! I have a request. It is a very important one. I forgot the real reason I came to this place."

"What is it now?" The woman stopped and looked at Benedict unenthusiastically. Benedict repeated the question he had asked at the eastern village.

The woman shook her head.

"I haven't seen them. In fact, I'm looking for the other villagers myself—they've all disappeared somewhere. If outlanders really did come to the village, someone would have chased them out by now."

Benedict nodded and took out the folded poster and a pencil from his pocket.

"I understand. Lastly, please teach me the name of this village."

"No. Why would you want to know something like that? And what is that paper?"

"It is only a memo—"

Before Benedict could finish, the woman took a step forward and reached for the poster. She snatched it from his hands, but Benedict did not put up any resistance.

The woman stared at the map and legend Benedict had drawn.

“Is it a memo pad. I am looking for my friends. But because I do not know where my friends are, I am finding nearby villages one by one.” Benedict explained. The woman nodded, uninterested, and flipped over the poster. She then held it out to Benedict.

But as Benedict reached for the poster, she quickly drew back her hand. Benedict grabbed nothing but thin air.

“Oho. Are you telling a joke?” Benedict asked, amused.

The woman ignored him. She opened up the poster and closely examined the face of the man in the photograph. She froze. So strong was her gaze on the picture that she was practically drilling a hole through it.

“If this was a film, I could go see it with you. I am very sad.”

Benedict was a man who knew no surrender. The woman did not answer. A gentle wind blew past, shaking the poster and passing between the woman and the embarrassed Benedict.

About twenty seconds passed. Benedict looked at the woman from the side as she stood frozen.

“Um, I…!”

To his shock, she was crying. Each time she blinked, tears streamed down her cheeks again. The woman was holding the poster in one hand, and holding her other hand in a clenched fist over her chest.

“…”

Benedict could do nothing but wait. He looked a little happier.

Eventually, the woman wiped her tears on her right sleeve, then took out a white handkerchief and properly wiped her face.

“Are you calmed down now?” Benedict asked with a smile.

With her right hand, the woman grabbed him by the collar and pulled him toward herself with all her might.

“Whoa!”

Benedict’s face was less than twenty centimeters away from hers. He was leaning forward. She met his gaze, her eyes slightly red.

“Wh-what is it? Are you going to kiss me?” Benedict asked, bewildered. The woman stuffed the poster into her pocket and began to violently shake Benedict by the coat with both hands.

“Take me to the capital!”

“What…? Pardon me?”

“Take me to the capital! Take me to the capital! Right now! Do you understand me? Take. Me. To. The. Capital!”

“Er, please wait a moment. I do not understand what you are saying very much.” Benedict replied as the woman continued to shake him.

“You must have come by a vehicle! Take me to the capital on it! Take me to Kunst! Do you understand me? Take me to the capital! To Kunst!”

“I do not un-”

“Take me to Kunst! Right now! I’ll get ready as soon as I can, so now! Do you understand me? As soon as possible! To Kunst!”

“W-wait a moment. Please calm down…” Benedict said in Bezelese. The woman finally stopped shaking him.

“What did you say? Do you mean you understand?”

“No, no. I asked you to calm down. Please tell me the reason. Why you need to go to Kunst. And please let your fingers go of my coat.”

The woman finally released Benedict, her shoulders heaving up and down. She lightly shook her head and looked up at him, her short black hair fluttering in the wind.

“All right. I’ll explain again. I want to go to the capital by today or tomorrow by any means possible. Could you take me—”

“Fi!”

A male voice cut in from behind them.

The woman turned, surprised. Benedict also turned. There was a man running over from the direction of the village. He was in his fifties, and sported a beard. There was a rifle slung over his shoulder.

“There you are, Fi!”

The man sounded like he was scolding her. The woman called ‘Fi’ did not answer him.

“You know better than to loiter by the pond in wintertime. What if you ran across wolves or bears?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Never mind that, now. Grandmother Jans needs more of her usual medicine. She doesn’t seem to be feeling so well, so hurry on and look after her.”

“All right.”

The woman nodded. The man urged her to quickly return to the village. As she turned, she met Benedict’s gaze. But that was only for a moment, as she quickly walked away. Her small silhouette grew distant.

“Wait… You there.”

Benedict turned to the man. The man suddenly stopped, then thought for a moment.

"I've seen you in the papers. Are you by any chance the Hero of the Mural?"

Benedict nodded.

"Incredible. So you're Carr Benedict. I'd heard that there were Sou Be-Il pilots doing some training on the lake, but to think you'd have come along with them… it's certainly amazing."

"Thank you."

"Did that girl pester you?" The man asked.

"N-no. That young lady and I only spoke. She said that she wants to go to the capital."

"What? To Kunst? …Well, I suppose that's only normal for people her age." The man said, sounding a little astonished. He then asked the hero what he was doing here.

"I… am on vacation and came to tour. That young lady said that this village is not for touring. I was just thinking to go to another village. Please excuse me."

As Benedict turned,

"Mr. Hero."

The man stopped him.

"Yes?"

"You did a good thing there, announcing the mural to both sides at the same time. You deserve that nickname."

"Thank you."

Benedict and the man began to walk in opposite directions.

"'Mr. Hero', huh? …I'm only a fake, though… but anyway. It's too bad I couldn't get on her good side."

Benedict mumbled to himself in Bezelese as he walked over the footpath.

"Hm. 'Fi' is probably a nickname. But she was beautiful. Although I suppose I'll never see her again. 'The biggest aeroplane is the one that got away', they say."

It had been some time since he had mumbled in his native language.

"Why was she crying? Does she know that man? …Wait! She took the map I was drawing. Ah well. If Allison and Wil aren't in the next village, I'll just have to get some tea and sweets there on my own."

All alone, he talked to himself as he turned the last curve in the valley. He could see the valley entrance, the endlessly large frozen lake, and the nearly-straight road leading there. And the footprints covering the path.

“Right! They came by car, so if there aren’t any tire tracks, it means they haven’t come this way. I should have thought of that earlier. This was a waste of time.” He said, walking along the path with ease.

At that moment,

“!”

He froze. Very slowly, Benedict looked down at his feet.

The snow was sunken in the shape of a path, pattered down by countless footprints. The pathway, a little less than two meters wide, was shaped with perfect precision. It was also the width of a car.

Benedict knelt down and examined the footprints. The sizes and shapes of the countless soles were all similar. Upon close examination, he found that(other than his own) there were only three kinds of footprints making up the path. Many identical footprints were stamped on the snow in a dense formation, sometimes overlapping. And some footprints were pointing not only forward and backward, but sideways as well. It was as though three people had intentionally patted down the snow with their feet.

Benedict searched for portions that were not stepped on. He felt almost idiotic, crawling in the snow, but he was dead serious. And soon,

“Bingo.”

There was a ten-centimeter gap between a pair of footprints. In that gap he spotted several oval shapes. They were marks from snow chains.

“Allison and Wil definitely passed through this way. And they haven’t come back through here.”

Benedict stood. He turned his gaze to the valley.

“And someone—probably the villagers—quickly covered up their tire tracks. So not only are they suspicious of outlanders, they’re also kidnappers and liars? This is one heck of a village.”

Benedict glanced at his wristwatch. The sun set earlier in the mountains than in the plains. There was only about an hour left until dusk. The sky was growing cloudy as well.

“I suppose they won’t welcome me either, but that doesn’t sound too bad for a change.”

With that, he quickly left the road and leapt into the woods next to the ramp.

Chapter 4: Jailbreak and Escape

The basement was dark.

Stone bricks lined the floors and walls, and the ceiling stood at a rather tall at three meters. On each of the four walls was a window near the ceiling, shining white in the darkness. They were crossed with metal bars, and frosted panes of glass were inside the frames.

The basement was about the size of an average living room. But the only difference was the iron bars dividing it in a 4:6 ratio. There was a steep wooden staircase in the smaller section, leading upstairs. At the top of the steps was a locked wooden hatch.

There were two thick old mattresses inside the cell. Atop them were blankets, upon which Allison and Wil slept. Their coats and some thick blankets had been placed over them.

One of the two suddenly awoke. The blanket and the coat slid onto the mattress as the figure stood, stumbling across the floor.

Thud!

With a loud noise, the figure hit their shoulder on the iron bars.

Wil woke up.

"Hey! Is anyone out there?! Hello?!"

Allison cried out at the hatch, shaking the locked cell door. It rattled loudly.

There was a moment of silence.

"It looks like there's no one upstairs. Someone would have come by now if they'd heard all this noise." Wil commented.

Wil was wearing his coat, and was sitting on the mattress with his feet in front of him. He ruffled his hair and shook his head to chase away his fatigue.

Allison, still wearing her coveralls, returned to the mattresses and sat next to Wil. Her coat was next to the bed, and her bag was nowhere to be found.

Allison sighed.

"Why?! Why us?!"

She was clearly agitated.

"I don't know." Wil replied cooly. He asked Allison if her shoulder was all right. She nodded and thanked him for his concern.

Then, she turned to Wil.

"Hey… maybe, just maybe… I think I know why they locked us up."

“Hm?” Wil looked up.

“Maybe this entire village specializes in crafting gold jewelry. They’re on to us, aren’t they?” She said grimly.

“…I’m not too sure about that.” Wil replied hesitantly.

“Or maybe they make a living off of caviar?”

“That sounds even less likely.”

“Bummer.”

Allison stood and went over to the bars again. She then cried,

“Then why in the world would you lock us up in this clammy place?! Hey! Open up already! I demand to speak to the manager! You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry!”

“Whew…” Wil sighed.

Tiring herself out with her shouting, Allison returned to Wil’s side.

“Great. So they’re going to keep us here until we die.”

“I don’t think so, Allison.” Wil replied, “look over here.”

In a corner of the room was a water bottle sealed with a cork, two cups, and two long loaves of hard bread. There was even a small pile of blankets.

“I guess you’re right. But I’m still not going to let ‘em get away with knocking us out and putting us in a cell without even an explanation.”

“Yeah.”

Allison looked at Wil, then at the ceiling, and shouted at whoever was responsible for locking them in.

“If you’re going to lock us up, I’d have been satisfied with some clean sheets and a shower and some room service! You hear me?!”

Wil remained sitting on the mattress.

“There must have been a misunderstanding. I’m sure the villagers had their reasons, and ended up mistaking us for someone else. Maybe they just left to call the police in a nearby town. I’m sure we’ll clear things up soon.”

“Right. So that means we don’t necessarily have to stay here, right?”

Allison glanced at her watch and stood.

“Let’s get out of this cell. And the village, too. We can’t waste any more time.”

“You’re right, but… how?”

Allison walked up to the iron bars and shook the sliding door.

“See this lock on the outer side of the door? It’s pretty cheap. You could find it anywhere. In fact, I can pick it with my hairpin—I learned how to do it from someone. Apparently pilots shouldn’t sit around acting all meek even when they’re held prisoner.”

“But we can’t reach it from here.”

“That’s why I’ll have to go outside.”

“How?”

Allison pointed at the top of one of the walls. Wil looked up.

“The window?”

“We just have to get rid of those bars. I know how to do it.”

“Really?”

“Let’s give it a go.”

They began preparations for escape, with Allison in the lead.

First, they tore the blankets. They widened a small hole in the mattress and extracted one of the springs, using the pointed end to make small incisions on the edges. Then they pulled the blanket in opposite directions and ripped it into lengths. Afterwards, they tightly knotted the ends. They soaked the knots in water, then pulled on either end of the knot with all their might until the water began to drip.

“Now it’s never going to get untied. It’s just like that trick you use to tie your shoelaces.”

With that, they had two long ropes that could reach all the way down from the ceiling. Then, they tied them together to create one long line.

Finally, they dragged the two mattresses under the window, but at a very slight distance from the wall. They put one on top of the other.

“Here I go.” Said Allison, tucking her hair into her clothes. She began to warm up.

“Are you sure about this, Allison?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot who taught you to climb trees, Wil.” Allison said, standing in a corner of the room with her hands and feet firmly on the walls.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right? Should I push the mattresses under you?”

“No, just leave them there. Get the rope ready, okay? I’m going to start now.”

With her hands and feet in the little gaps between the bricks, Allison began to dexterously climb to the top. Wil watched from beside the mattress—his eyes were so trained on the sight that the pace of his blinking slowed. One of his feet was against the mattresses, so that he could instantly push them under Allison if she were to lose her grip.

But his worries proved unfounded, as Allison easily made it to the window. She grabbed the grooves of the frame, one hand after the other.

“There.”

Hanging from the frame by her hands, Allison pulled herself up like she was doing pull-ups. Then, she shook the iron bars with her left hand.

“It’s pretty strong.”

Supporting herself by her hands and feet, Allison grabbed the bars with her right hand. She then looked down at Wil and held out her left hand.

“What is it?”

“The rope. Toss it over.”

“Right.”

Wil picked up the rope from the floor and threw it to Allison. She caught it immediately and looped it around the leftmost bar in the window. Then, she pulled it over to the rightmost side and pulled it out. All of this she did with one hand.

Soon, she had the rope looped around every bar, including the one at the center. The ends of the rope on either side of the window were touching the basement floor. Allison instructed Wil to hold the rope as she climbed it down.

“The frame of the bars is bolted to the window. We’ll have to pull it out whole.”

Wil and Allison each took one end of the rope.

“Ready? One, two, three!”

They pulled as hard as they could. At first, the bars only creaked. But two or three tries later, they began to bend. But they could not completely dislodge the bars.

Wil gasped, his brow dripping with sweat.

“This isn’t working…”

“We’ve weakened it a lot, so I’ll finish it off. One good impact should do.” Allison said, climbing the rope to the window once more. Hanging from the bars, she pulled up either end of the rope. She held one end in one hand and the other end in her other hand.

“Stand back, Wil. This might get dangerous.”

“Wh-what are you—”

As Wil backed away, Allison grinned mischievously.

“THIS!”

With the wall against her back, Allison leapt forward. Each end of the rope was looped around her shoulder like a knapsack.

A second before Allison hit the mattress, the rope was pulled taut. The bars took the brunt of the impact.

Finally, the bent bars fell away from the window, screeching against the window frame. At the same time, Allison bent her knees to minimize the impact as she landed atop the mattress.

"!"

As Wil looked on in shock, Allison rolled forward in perfect landing position.

The bars fell behind her, landing exactly where she had been a moment ago. They hit the mattress and bounced onto the ground, rolling into the iron bars diving the room. The loud clanging of metal on metal filled the basement. Wil winced.

When the noise finally stopped, Wil breathed a sigh of relief. Allison stood with ease.

"See? It worked."

"…"

Wil stared blankly for a while, before finally opening his mouth.

"Allison. You were this close to getting killed just now."

"Yeah, but look."

Allison looked back and forth between him and the heavy iron bars lying on the floor.

"It worked out, didn't it?"

The hinges creaked as the basement hatch opened.

Allison's upper body poked in upside-down from the hatch, her long blond hair cascading down. She quickly climbed down the steps and met Wil from outside the bars. There was snow all over her clothes and hair—she had broken the frosted glass with the bars and squirmed out the small window.

"Well?" Wil whispered. Allison replied, though not any quieter than usual.

"There's no one upstairs. I think we're near the outskirts of the village—I didn't have time to look around properly, but the steeple looked kind of far. I didn't spot anyone in town, and it looks like it's going to start snowing soon."

With that, Allison challenged the lock with half of her hairpin. And just as Wil picked up his and her coats,

"There."

The lock came undone effortlessly. The little sliding door opened with a loud screech.

Wil stepped outside, handing Allison her coat.

"All right. We'll leave the rest to those two." Allison said. Wil turned as he came out of the cell. There was a blanket over the mattress, with two humanoid shapes underneath. They were made with blankets and the rope. It looked just like two people snuggled up together.

"They look close." Allison mumbled to herself.

"Allison?"

"N-never mind. Let's go. It's getting dark, so we should try and sneak out of the village somehow."

* * *

"I'm running out of time." Benedict muttered, glancing at his watch.

He was in the woods, knee-deep in snow. The forest was dense and difficult to see through, but it was getting late and the sky grew dark. The snowfall was worsening. It was easy to tell that sundown and bad weather were both approaching.

Having leapt into the woods to the left of the village entrance, Benedict began to head into the depths of the woods. He had stay out of sight of the road, not spotted by anyone—he slowly and cautiously made his way into the depths.

Snow falling from the trees piled up in waist-high mounds, and he was hindered by clumps of snow falling from overhead without warning. When he had to enter snow that reach up to his thighs, Benedict had to clear the snow ahead of him with the submachine gun case he brought along. On occasion he glanced at the valley to confirm his position. He had already long passed the ponds where he met the young woman.

Benedict pressed on. His forehead was covered in sweat.

After traversing a certain distance, Benedict began to move to the side of the forest. He lay on his stomach and observed the valley from next to a large tree.

"Finally."

The village was within sight. He could see the houses scattered around the main area, along with the steeple. But no one was outside. The little village in the snowy valley was eerily quiet, crouching in the darkness.

"It's not uninhabited, is it?"

Benedict returned to the woods and began to walk again. Soon, something stopped him.

"There must be people living here. But are all the villages in this country like this?" Benedict muttered, astonished. Strung up in front of him was a barbed-wire fence as tall as he was. When he dug into the snow underneath, he found that the fence reached down to the ground. Each wire was hanging parallel to the ground at twenty-centimeter intervals, as though connecting one tree to the next. There was barbed wire on the branches as well.

“This is too thorough a job if they’re only trying to keep animals out. Is this some sort of secret base?”

Benedict followed the fence to the right. But no matter how far he walked, it continued without a single gap. It was surrounding the entire village. The wire was wrapped tightly around the trees, so it was impossible to cut and too taut to be tampered with.

“Damn it.” He swore.

At that very moment, he spotted a moving figure by the houses. The figure emerged from underneath the floor of a small building—a storehouse of some sort built with stone bricks—and poked their head out of the snow from a crouching position. The figure was quite small in build, but Benedict clearly saw a flash of long blond hair.

From next to the tree, he watched the figure go into the house.

“Allison… I came all this way to save you, but I suppose I won’t get the chance.”

He sighed, exhausted. Then,

“!”

He spotted other people near the cluster of houses by the steeple. Several villagers emerged from the house and onto the street, and talked together. Afterwards, some of them returned inside. The rest—three men—began walking deeper into the valley. Toward the house Allison had just entered.

“Not good.”

Benedict glowered at the barbed wire wrapped around the tree. He then looked around. One of the trees serving as a fencepost was relatively young and thin. It was about thirty centimeters thick and four meters tall. Benedict took hold of the branches and shook and hung from them, but the branches would not break. Snow fell from the treetop and onto the ground.

Benedict took off the case from his shoulders and opened the zipper. Inside was a submachine gun and a small pouch that could carry up to three magazines. Taking the gun, he quickly loaded it and prepared to open fire.

He then dug out the snow piled at the foot of the tree until part of the roots were visible. Folding up the case, he placed it on the ground in the shape of a thick pillow. Benedict then pierced through the case with the gun, creating a makeshift silencer.

“I guess I’ll run if they spot me.”

Benedict pulled the trigger.

There was a tiny noise as the first shot was fired. Benedict continued to pull the trigger.

He finished off all twenty-eight rounds in the magazine. White smoke wafted from the charred case. Benedict hurriedly covered it with snow to put out the smoke. The tree had been chiseled away by the bullets, now down to half its original thickness.

Benedict grabbed hold of the branches with both hands and put his weight onto them at once.

Crunch.

The trunk bent, then broke from the base where it had been chipped away. Benedict lost his grip on the branches and fell onto the snow. The snow falling from the branch covered his face.

Spitting out the snow and water, Benedict stood. The tree had fallen completely. The barbed wire had neither snapped nor gotten loose, but it was distorted by the fallen tree. There was enough of an opening for a person to pass through.

The three men continued down the street, not noticing Benedict's presence. He quickly jammed the submachine gun back into the bag(which was scorched and damaged) and crawled under the fence with it at his side.

Finally through the barbed wire, he crawled across the snow and approached the valley. The woods came to an abrupt stop at a particularly large tree. There was no cover from there to the building where Allison and Wil were. The men continued walking straight toward it.

"Am I too late? Damn it!" Benedict swore.

At that moment, it began to snow. A thick flurry descended upon the land, as though someone was letting down a curtain. Although it was nearly impossible to see, Benedict could make out the shapes of the men approaching the building. And if he left the woods, the men would be able to see him as well.

"Damn it… I *am* too late…" He swore again.

"It's finally snowing." Allison said, peeking out the door. Wil was behind her.

"Looks like it's going to be heavy, too."

Allison shut the door again. They were wearing their coats and hats, with gloves on their hands.

"It'll make it easier for us to hide. We'll carefully sneak out of the valley."

"But what about the car? We won't make it back on foot."

"That's true. How about we break into one of the houses on the way back and steal a horse or something?"

"That's a crime, Allison."

"It's not as serious of a crime as locking people up against their will. Anyway, we'll see how things go."

With that, Allison slowly opened the door and waded out of the house. Wil followed after her hesitantly.

"!"

But when they turned the corner of the house to their left, Allison stopped without warning. Wil nearly walked right into her. There was an old wooden ledge along the wall, and empty flowerpots were stacked together atop it.

“Wha-”

Before Wil could finish, Allison covered his mouth with a gloved hand. She shushed him and whispered into his ear.

“There’s someone here. I think he’s coming this way.”

Wil gaped in horror. It looked like he was on the verge of tears.

“You stay here, Wil. When the person comes over, just make up an excuse. Then I’ll do that thing I did with the awful police officer last summer.” Allison said quickly. Wil nodded, mouthing a ‘yes’.

Leaving Wil behind, Allison quickly disappeared around the corner.

Wil stood blankly between the wall and the snow fallen from the roof. Soon, he heard someone stepping through the snow by the door. Each footstep grew louder as Wil stiffened in fear.

The footsteps stopped. And a moment later, a man turned the corner and appeared before Wil.

“Ack! I’m sorry!”

“I do not understand why you are sorry, but I do forgive you.” The man said quietly. Wil gaped.

“B-Benedict?”

Benedict chuckled and replied in Bezelese.

“Right. Who’d you think I was?”

“Wh-what are you doing here?”

“I was so bored that I decided to interrupt your date. Although I suppose I just ended up coming to rescue you two.”

“Thank you…” Wil said, relaxing.

“You’re welcome. Now, I just saw three village men going into the house in front of us. We’ll sneak away while they’re inside. Where’s All- WHOA!”

Benedict’s upper body fell forward as he cried out. Allison had approached from behind and pulled him by his ankles.

Refusing to lose his balance, Benedict grabbed onto the ledge with his left hand. It quickly broke. The flowerpots fell. With the cacophonous cracking of the ledge and the pots, Benedict finally hit the ground.

“Allison! No! It’s Benedict!” Wil yelled. Allison was just about to kick the fallen Benedict in the side.

“Huh?”

“That hurt…” Benedict said in Bezelese.

“No way!” Allison exclaimed. Benedict, covered in snow, looked back and greeted her. He slowly got to his feet.

At that moment, what little of the ledge that remained on the wall finally collapsed, along with the flowerpots that were atop it.

There was another loud noise. At the same time, a door slammed open nearby.

“See? I told you I heard something. There were voices, too!”

It was a man’s voice.

“Argh! Look what you did! They heard us!”

“I’m sorry about that. …Wait. Are you saying this is *my* fault?”

“R-r-ru-”

“Run! This way!”

Allison finished Wil’s sentence for him as she gave him a push in the opposite direction from the voices. They dashed across the knee-deep snow as Benedict followed after them.

“Why did I even come here in the first place?” He grumbled.

“Run faster!” Allison yelled, slapping Wil on the back. Benedict was behind them. Eventually, they reached the road in the middle of the valley. It had been flattened out by the villagers, which made it much easier to run along.

The snowfall had grown heavier since sundown. It was difficult to see anything in front of them. Even the nearest house was concealed by the snow. They could hear voices behind them.

“You! Identify yourselves! Stop! Stop right there!”

“As if we would!” Allison replied. Benedict caught up to her.

“We’re going in the opposite direction from the lake.”

“Well, what are we supposed to do?!”

There was a gunshot behind them. One, then another.

Benedict glanced backwards.

"It's all right. They're just signaling each other."

"Don't you have any weapons, Major?! The villagers took my bag with my gun still inside!"

Benedict immediately became aware of the weight of the submachine gun on his back.

"…No."

"Then run! We just keep running for our lives!"

"All right…"

They continued down the road as snow blanketed their heads and shoulders.

As they passed by one of the houses, the door suddenly opened and a middle-aged woman stepped outside. The moment her eyes met those of the shocked trio, she shrieked and scrambled back into the house.

"What did we do to deserve this?" Allison complained as they ran. Wil could not respond, too busy exerting himself sprinting.

"Who knows?" Benedict replied calmly.

They continued to flee.

Wil was the first to start gasping for breath. His steps began to slow.

"C'mon, Wil! We can make it!" Allison cried, giving him a push on the back. They headed further and further into the valley. And soon, they spotted another house to the left.

"Why don't we just go inside and take the person in the house hostage?" Allison wondered, getting desperate. But at that moment, the door opened. The villager stepped outside and looked at the trio, shocked. She froze. Then,

"This way! Quickly!" She cried. She was a young woman with short black hair.

"Hm?"

"Wait, I know that woman! Do as she says, and make sure you don't leave any footprints!" Benedict said as Allison and Wil hesitated.

They doubled back and began to walk along the footprints leading into the house. Still covered in snow, Allison, Wil, and Benedict arrived at the doorstep. Benedict smiled.

"Hello, Fi."

"Don't act all friendly with me. Get inside."

The woman, Benedict, the confused Allison, and the heavily-panting Wil entered the house. The woman quickly shut the door and bolted it.

The interior of the house was dim.

In the middle of the room was a cold stove, a cupboard, and a table and chairs for about six people. By the wall was a sofa, and there was a hallway leading into a room.

Wil bent forward, gasping for breath. Allison put a hand on his shoulder.

“This way.” Said the woman, heading to the hallway. She lifted up a hatch.

“Go inside. Watch your head and your feet.”

Allison made a face. Benedict took the lead and stepped inside, followed by Wil. Allison shot the woman a look and entered as well.

Her feet finally reached the stone floor of the basement, and her hand touched Wil’s back. At that moment, the hatch closed behind them. The basement was pitch-black.

“Hey!” Allison cried. But Benedict quickly cut her off.

“Quiet.”

They could hear loud knocking upstairs, followed by the voice of a middle-aged man.

“Fi! Are you inside? Open up!”

For several seconds, the only sound in the basement was that of Wil’s ragged breathing. Soon, they heard voices again.

“Hello?! Fi?”

“I’ll be right there!”

Allison whispered to Benedict.

“Did she just trick us too?”

“We can’t say for sure yet.” Benedict answered.

“Anyway, who is that woman?” She asked.

“Actually, I don’t even know her real name yet.”

“What?”

“Well, things happened.”

“Is this really all right?”

“Quiet.”

Benedict ended the conversation and focused on the sounds outside.

There was the sound of the door being unbolted and opened. Several people entered the house. Their footsteps rang through the floor.

“Fi! Thank goodness you’re safe!”

“Did something happen? I was clearing the snow outside when I heard gunshots. I ran straight inside.”

“We found suspicious people in the village. Three of them. They must have come this way—have you seen anything?”

There was a brief silence.

“No. What’s going—”

“Never you mind, Fi. It’s dangerous to stay alone—I want you to go to the village hall.”

“…I don’t want to. I can’t leave Grandfather’s house empty. I’ll be fine. I’ve always been fine.”

Another silence.

“All right. Do you have a gun with you?”

“Yes. I have Grandfather’s.”

“And you know how to use it?”

“He taught me, just in case.”

“All right. Then I want you to sleep in your basement tonight with the gun next to you and the doors bolted shut. We’ll be keeping watch overnight, so you should be safe—but if you run into anyone suspicious, shoot them on sight.”

“I understand…”

Several male voices warned the woman to be careful. Then, the door closed. There was the sound of the woman bolting it shut.

They heard footsteps walking toward them. The sound grew fainter as it headed for the room, then returned. Then, the basement hatch opened.

Allison, Wil, and Benedict looked up at the dim light coming from the hatch.

The woman slowly poked her head inside. The light was behind her, making it difficult to see her face. But the contours of the large automatic handgun in her possession was clear even in the dark.

“Take me to the capital. If you refuse, I’ll hand you over to the villagers. Do you understand me?” She asked icily.

Several seconds of silence.

“I understand. I want to hear your story more.” Benedict finally replied.

Allison and Wil exchanged glances.

“Give me a minute.”

The woman turned and closed the hatch again. Allison, Wil, and Benedict took off their hats and coats and waited for her in the dark. The hatch opened again. The gun in the woman's hand had been replaced by an old oil lamp.

With each step she took downstairs, the basement grew brighter. This room also was lined with stone bricks, but it was much larger than the one where Allison and Wil had been imprisoned. There were all sorts of things on the shelves lining the walls—old plates with pictures, little picture frames covered with cloth, a wooden box sealed with a lock, and human skulls.

"Whoa!"

"Eeek!"

Wil and Allison screamed simultaneously at the sight of the skulls. Light from the lamp hit the large, hollow eyes, creating a stark contrast between the surface and the shadows.

"There are so many…" Benedict said. About seven human skulls of varying sizes were lined up on the shelves.

"Hey! What in the world is—" Allison began, but Wil put a hand on her shoulder and stopped her. He turned to the woman.

"These people are your family, right?"

"Yes." The woman replied, surprised. Benedict looked at Wil. Allison poked him with her elbow.

"I read about it in a book. It's a custom here in Iks—you see, there isn't much land in this country to bury the dead. So when someone dies, he or she is buried in a large stone coffin, only to be dug up again after some time to retrieve the body. The family of the deceased then cleans and polishes the body with their own hands and keeps the remains in their home."

"Thank you for sparing me the trouble of explaining. Yes. The people here are my ancestors. They've given us the bed of earth so that we could also return to it in the future."

"I understand. We must politely behave as the guests." Benedict said.

"…Um, hello. Sorry for screaming just now." Allison said, greeting the small skull nearest to her.

The woman's gaze softened very slightly.

"Take a seat."

The woman carried the lamp into the middle of the room and asked Allison, Wil, and Benedict to sit at the round table in the middle. They all did so, with the lamp on the table.

The woman went back upstairs and returned with a bottle of water. Allison, Wil, and Benedict poured some into the cups stacked upside-down on the bottle and drank.

Once everyone had calmed down, the woman turned to Allison and Wil.

"First of all, who are you? Why did you come to our village?"

Allison did not even try to hide her indignation.

"We were just here as tourists when the old woman at the building by the steeple knocked us out! Then we were locked up in a cell! We just barely managed to escape. *We're* the ones who want to ask questions!"

Wil placed a hand on Allison's shoulder as she complained furiously.

"We don't know why they tried to lock us up. But all we want to do is leave this village as soon as possible and head back to Mushke."

"I see. I'm afraid I don't have any answers for you." The woman said cooly, and turned to Benedict.

"You know one another, right? Could we all talk together, then?"

Benedict nodded.

"Yes. This is Wilhelm Schultz and Allison Whittington. I was looking for them in order to play together. I told you my name before. My name is Benedict."

Benedict turned to Allison and Wil.

"Allison, Wil, this lady is a person I met at the village entrance before. After, I found that you were at this village. So I hid my way into the village and saw you exiting from a house."

He turned to the woman.

"Saying that, I do not know your real name. Please tell me your name."

The woman thought for a moment, then replied,

"Fiona. Please call me Fiona."

"Miss Fiona. Your name is not in Sou Be-Il, but it is very beau-"

"Can we get to the point?"

"I understand. But I want to ask you one question before. Are there any other people in your home—er, house?"

"No. I've lived with my grandfather all my life, but he passed away earlier this year."

"I understand."

"Back to the point."

"Yes. Let us go back to the point. Do you want to go to the capital? You said that you want to go to the capital before, when you and I met at the village entrance."

The woman named Fiona nodded firmly and resolutely.

"Yes. I don't care how—if you agree to take me to Kunst, I'll help you escape the valley. I can't just up and leave on my own, so I'll sneak out with you."

"I understand."

"Then I'll get ready now."

"Please wait. Today is too hard. We should sortie tomorrow. So please hide us three people in here tonight."

Wil hung his head, defeated. Allison shrugged. Fiona did not understand.

"Why can't we go today? The capital is far away—we should leave as soon as possible."

Allison and Wil listened in silence. Benedict replied,

"Because I am now sleepy."

"You've got to be kidding me!"

"I am kidding you. Was it not funny? Then I will not kid you. It is snowing. It is nighttime. If we cross a wide and iced lake in this condition, we are killing ourselves. A strong army soldier cannot do it. Do you want to see someone die?"

"…"

Fiona shot Benedict a look, but she slowly shook her head.

"Saying that, we will sortie tomorrow. We must pray that the snowing stops in the morning. After we leave the valley, we will find my aerosan. We will ride it to the Kunst and, if we are hurried, we should change to an aeroplane on the way to the capital. It is amazing, no? We will arrive very fast on an aeroplane."

Fiona looked dubious.

"Can we really? Could we really leave in the morning and arrive by tomorrow afternoon? Aeroplanes are flying machines, right? Where would you find something like that? And do you know anyone who can drive one?" She asked one question after another. Allison glanced at Benedict next to her, and replied,

"You don't know Benedict, do you?"

"Amazingly enough, no." Benedict replied with a delighted grin.

As Allison, Wil, and Benedict looked at her curiously, Fiona stuttered.

"Wh-what?"

"I see. So you're the Hero of the Mural. I apologize if I offended you."

"No problem. It is not something I should brag with my own mouth. Saying that, these two people—ouch."

Allison stomped on Benedict's toes.

"—Please do not worry about an aeroplane. Can we sortie at dawn tomorrow? Can we sleep in this house tonight? If we sleep outside, we can freeze and die."

Fiona nodded.

"All right. You can stay here until morning. I'll bring you some blankets, and some food and water—although it won't be hotel-class. Is that enough?"

This time, Benedict nodded.

"Negotiation successful. Thank you very much."

"Um… Fiona, could I ask you a favor?" Wil said.

"What is it?"

"Do you have a telephone, by any chance? I came to this country on a school trip, and I'm sure the others are worrying about me at the hotel in Mushke. I'd like to contact them if at all possible…"

Fiona shook her head.

"There aren't any telephones in this village. We have an emergency radio, but that's over in the village hall."

"I see…"

"It'll be easier if you just give up, Wil." Allison said mercilessly. Benedict raised his hand.

"I have one question as well."

"Yes?"

"Why do you want to go to the capital?"

Benedict continued.

"I would like to know why. I have two reasons. One reason is because if you teach me, I might be able to help you. I could take you to where you want, or help you to do what you want."

Fiona stared silently. Then she spoke.

"And the other reason?"

Benedict laughed sheepishly.

“The second reason is curiosity. I want to know because of curiosity. I want to know what you are doing. Allison and Wil will want to know, also.”

Allison spoke up.

“I don’t really care myself.” She sounded sincerely uninterested. Wil quickly cut in.

“We won’t really mind if you decide not to tell us.” He said, covering for Allison.

Several seconds of silence later,

“I see… But you’ll find out anyway once we get to the capital, so I suppose I could tell you now.” Fiona said cooly. “Although I don’t know if you’ll believe me.”

She took out a piece of paper from her pocket. She put the lamp aside and opened up the crumpled paper on the table.

“Ah. You saw this paper and cried—er… surprised. Is this paper the reason?”

Allison glanced, and Wil stared at the piece of paper.

“It’s an advertisement for the rally in the capital.” Wil said.

“Yes. I want to go to that rally. I want to show myself to everyone there.”

Benedict and Wil exchanged glances. Wil let Benedict ask the question on both their minds.

“May I ask you in detail? What will you do when you show yourself?”

“I am going to let them know that I exist. That I’m still alive.”

Both Wil and Allison looked at Fiona. Her face was set.

“Who are you?” Benedict asked.

Fiona closed her eyes, holding her right hand in a fist over her chest.

Several seconds of silence later, Fiona looked up and spoke, sensing the weight behind each and every syllable.

“I… I am the princess of Ikstova.”

Chapter 5: The Entrusted Ones

"What do you mean, Schultz isn't back? At this hour? Who went into town with him this afternoon?"

"It was me, sir."

"What in the world is going on? You were supposed to stick toge-"

"THAT'S MY LINE, SIR!"

"Ack! Let's not raise our voices, now. What happened?"

"Damn that Wil! He told me he'd be back by dinnertime and left without me, asking me to keep my mouth shut!"

"What, on his own?"

"No, sir. We ran into some of his friends by coincidence on the way back to the hotel. We had a fun chat and got invited to their country house."

"And you're saying that Schultz went along with them?"

"They said I could come too, but I declined. I tried to stop Wil, sir. I really did. Then he said he'd just go without me, and asked me to cover for him."

"*Schultz* asked you to cover for him? …In any case, it's already dinnertime. Why is he still not back?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Maybe he's going to stay the night there. It's getting dark, and it's started snowing."

"That's not acceptable. If he were to get into trouble, what would we say to his parents?"

"Don't worry, sir. He doesn't have any."

"Ah, of course. …Now, are you absolutely certain that Schultz did such a thing? You're not lying to me, are you?"

"I'm offended, sir. How could you not trust your own student?"

"…Other students, perhaps, but *you*…"

"Then how else would you explain Wil being gone? Did I kill him and dump his body in the lake, do you think?"

"No, well… ahem… my word. I would have believed the story if *you* were the one absent, but to think Schultz would do something so audacious…"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Or perhaps you killed Schultz and buried him somewhere? That sounds much more likely than—"

"…I'm going to get angry, sir."

"Enough of this farce—you're actually Schultz, aren't you? My eyesight isn't what it used to be, you know."

"…Can I hit something, sir?"

* * *

Just as Wil's friend and the teacher were talking at the hotel.

Large snowflakes poured from the pitch-black sky, covering the valley. There were torches burning at every door; light was leaking from the windows. The village was glowing.

Inside a certain house deep within the village, Allison, Wil, and Benedict were hiding in the basement. Fiona had brought them three mattresses—they took off their coats and sat comfortably against the walls. There were blankets spread over the thin folding mattresses. There were even more blankets folded neatly in a pile to the side. There was a single lamp on the table.

"We can finally breathe slowly. Today was a very fun day." Benedict said in Roxchean.

"Oh? Don't you mean 'busy day'?" Allison replied in Roxchean.

"No, I mean it was a fun day. I haven't done things like this in the past half year." Benedict answered in Bezelese. "I'm going to follow her to the end. Once we escape the village, I'm taking her to the capital. You two don't need to force yourselves to come—especially you, Wil. You're here on a school trip."

"That aside, do you believe her?" Allison asked.

"At this point, whether she really is the princess or not doesn't matter. What do you think, Wil?"

"I agree with you."

"Huh." Allison groaned.

Earlier.

"So you're living in hiding? That sounds cool."

It had been ten full seconds of silence since Fiona made her shocking declaration. Allison was the first to speak.

Wil, taken aback by both Fiona's statement and Allison's assumption, turned. Benedict spoke up.

"Allison. That is a little different. I do not know details, but this country's Highness and her family passed away ten years before. That is what I heard."

“What?” Allison blurted out, astonished. “Is that true? Wil? I thought this was a kingdom.”

“That’s what I learned as well. That there was a fire in the royal palace ten years ago, and that everyone lost their lives. That Iks was a kingdom in name only.”

“So what’s going on here?” Allison wondered. All eyes were on Fiona.

“There was one survivor… Me. Would you believe me?”

There was no answer. Fiona continued.

“I don’t care if you don’t.”

“How do your villagers think?” Benedict asked.

“I didn’t tell a soul. And I don’t intend to. But I’m going to announce my identity at the rally tomorrow so I can declare it to as many people as possible. Everyone is keeping an ear out for the referendum, and the rally will even be broadcast on radio. That’s why I need your help. And that’s why I’m helping you now.”

Fiona finished coldly.

“That’s my answer.”

There was another period of silence.

“I understand. Thank you.” Benedict finally replied, and immediately shifted his tone. “Now, everyone. Let us get sleep for tomorrow. But everyone, aren’t you hungry? I worked out very much this afternoon, so I am very hungry.”

Allison and Wil agreed, loudly and meekly respectively.

“I’m getting hungry myself. All right. I’ll make you dinner, just as I promised. Don’t come trying to help—it would be awful if someone spotted you. Wait in here.”

Later, the four of them ate the dinner prepared by Fiona.

Quite a bit of time passed after Fiona went upstairs. When she finally returned, she was carrying a large pot with a double-layered base. Inside the lower compartment was burning coal that kept the contents of the pot warm. In the upper compartment was a dish of vegetables and bacon boiled in cheese melted with white wine.

There was little conversation around the dinner table. After the meal, Fiona brewed them tea. Then, Benedict took the lead to thank Fiona for the meal and compliment her cooking.

“It’s been a while since I had a meal like this.” Fiona answered, cleaning up the plates and taking them back upstairs.

Allison thought for a moment and asked,

“You two don’t think she’s telling the truth, do you?”

She sounded neither suspicious nor sarcastic—Allison was being quite sincere.

"Well, she doesn't have any proof."

"I'm quite surprised myself. I don't know what to say. But it would really be something if she really is the princess."

"Or—and I'm sorry to suggest this, but—maybe she's delusional, and only *thinks* she's the real princess."

"That's also a possibility. But let's keep the conjecture for tomorrow, once she's revealed everything. We'll think about it once we've escaped the village. For tonight, all we need to know is that she's the one who gave us shelter." Benedict said. Allison and Wil nodded.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of footsteps. The hatch opened, and Fiona entered. She was carrying a small lamp, a dirty piece of cloth, and a wooden case.

"Will this suffice, Mr. Benedict? It's my grandfather's old toolkit."

Benedict got up. He took the box and examined its contents.

"Yes, it's here. Thank you. I will use her—er, *it* well. And please the lamp as well."

Benedict took out an oiling tool from the kit. He brought his case from the corner of the room and pulled out the submachine gun. He placed the gun on the case and the cloth, next to the lamp, and began to take the gun apart.

Fiona watched, fascinated. Allison reached over and picked up the magazine pouch. Two of the magazines were still full.

"So you did have a weapon after all." Allison grumbled.

"I remembered now. Saying that, I had the weapon." Benedict said, not sounding sorry in the least. Allison put the pouch back, astonished.

Benedict took apart the submachine gun into two main parts—the barrel and the body. He oiled the parts and polished them with the cloth. Fiona watched silently.

Eventually, as Benedict was finishing up, Fiona spoke up quietly.

"Have you ever killed someone?"

Benedict glanced at her and nodded.

"Yes. But that time, if we wanted to protect our lives, there was no other method."

"I see." Fiona replied. She then continued. "If… hypothetically, if I wanted to kill someone, do I just have to point the gun at him and pull the trigger? Is it… is it difficult?"

"It will depend on the person." Benedict answered. He finished putting the submachine gun back together, and placed it back in its case.

Fiona went back up the steps, opened the hatch, and reached outside. She retrieved something she had left upstairs and brought it to Benedict.

“Will you teach me how to use this?”

She was holding out a messenger bag. Benedict took it and opened it, tilting it toward the lamp to see inside. Inside the heavy bag was the large handgun Fiona had been carrying earlier.

“You don’t know?”

Benedict took out the gun. He attached the grip to it, and took out a wooden stock that was used to secure the gun to the shoulder so it could be aimed like a rifle. Because the gun was mounted into it, this model was also known as a holster stock. Other things were also inside the bag, including a case of ammunition and several empty magazines.

“Grandfather hid the fact that he owned things like this. I only found them after he passed away, while I was cleaning his bedroom. I don’t even know where the bullets are supposed to go. Or if this gun is still usable.”

Benedict took up the gun. He took out the magazine and pulled on the slide. Once he was certain that the gun was not loaded, he examined it from every angle and checked its functions. When he pulled the trigger, the hammer came down with a click.

“This is not broken anywhere, I think.”

“Then will you teach me?”

Benedict smiled.

“No. I will confiscate it like this.”

“Wha…”

“There is nothing good from you having a gun. You will be hurt.”

Fiona was stunned. Benedict looked her in the eye.

“And you will never be necessary to use this gun. You must not. The Her Highness must not swing a gun in front of so many people.”

“…”

“Wil.”

“Y-yes?” Wil looked up, not expecting to be called. But he quickly stood, passed by Allison, and went over to Benedict and Fiona.

“Saying that, I will loan this to Wil.”

“Wait, what?”

“If something bad happens, use this to protect your and Allison’s bodies. Of course, it is best if you never use it. Or think of it like a heavy protecting talisman.”

“…All right. I’ll hold on to it.”

Wil received the messenger bag and returned to his seat. Allison leaned over and looked inside.

"Miss Fiona." Benedict said.

"Yes?"

"Before, you said, 'if I wanted to kill someone'?"

"Yes. I did."

"Even so, you do not have to kill. You must not kill. But instead," Benedict paused. "I will hit him. I will ouch him with my fist."

Fiona's eyes widened.

"…You'll 'ouch' him?"

"Yes. I will ouch him." Benedict replied, dead serious.

"All right. …Thank you." Fiona replied with a smile. She began to chuckle.

Benedict looked on as Fiona laughed, and whispered to Allison in Bezelese.

"That *is* how you say 'punch' in Roxchean, right? 'I will ouch him'?"

"It certainly is." Allison replied without a hint of sarcasm.

* * *

The flickering light of the lamp faintly lit up the skulls laying by the wall.

Even the sound of the howling snowstorm outside was largely muted in the basement.

Three mattresses lay side-by-side on the floor. One was empty. On the mattress next to it sat Benedict, who was leaning against the wall.

On the last mattress was Wil, curled up in a ball with his blanket wrapped over his head. He was fast asleep. Next to him was Allison, lying in a very similar position. They looked much like a pair of bagworms.

The hatch opened, and Fiona came downstairs with a lamp in hand. Benedict looked up and held a finger over his mouth.

Fiona extinguished the lamp on the table and placed a pack of matches next to it. She then sat on the mattress next to Benedict's, placing her lamp on the shelf next to her.

"Are they really asleep?" She asked quietly.

"Yes, I believe that they are asleep." Benedict replied.

A little earlier.

All of a sudden, Wil said that he was sleepy. Allison agreed.

Fiona told them that the tea they drank at the village hall was one that the villagers often drank to help them get to sleep. She also told them that the tea had no negative side-effects, but that its effects must still be lingering.

Benedict told Allison and Wil to get to sleep. Fiona told them where to find the bathroom upstairs. They snuck into the bathroom and back, one at a time.

Wil picked up one of the blankets and picked out a mattress. He asked if one person should take one mattress. Fiona nodded.

"Will you sleep up in your room, Miss Fiona?" Benedict asked. To everyone's surprise, Fiona shook her head.

"These are the only spare mattresses I have. I don't want to sleep upstairs and have the other villagers find out that I didn't do as they told—I'll just sleep in the chair here."

"I cannot permit that."

Benedict insisted on sleeping on the floor, but Fiona was adamant that she could not let a guest do so. They argued back and forth for quite some time.

"This is ridiculous." Allison finally said, and threw a glare at Wil, who had been watching quietly. "You're so dense, Wil!"

"Wh-what?"

"Move over!"

"Huh? Ow."

Allison bent down and pushed Wil down to one side of his mattress. She then placed a blanket over the fallen Wil, and picked up another blanket for herself and sat down right next to him.

"…"

"…"

"Problem solved! Good night, everyone."

Benedict and Fiona watched in awe as Allison flopped down onto the mattress.

"Now go to sleep, Miss Fiona. We have to sortie in early morning tomorrow. I am confident in waking up early tomorrow. I will wake up everyone with no mercy."

Then, Benedict added that he would also go to sleep.

Fiona brought her blanket over to the mattress at the very end, took off her shoes, and arranged them neatly by the mattress. Her gaze was briefly drawn to the small skull on the ledge. It was the one Allison had greeted.

"Um… may I ask you something?" Fiona asked quietly. Benedict also replied quietly, careful not to wake the others.

"Yes? What is your question?"

"When you went from being an ordinary soldier to a hero… People began to treat you differently, didn't they?"

Benedict nodded.

"Yes. Very differently. I, who was a normal countryside Air Force pilot one day suddenly became an historical hero. Everyone looks at me with curious eyes. My rank jumped upward three levels like I died in battle. Friends and comrades I played with suddenly became very very far."

"Was it… painful?"

"Yes. It was painful sometimes, to be honest."

"I see…"

Fiona averted her gaze. But Benedict continued.

"But—there are people who look at me completely without change. It is because there are very complicated and complex reasons. But I was happy to meet the two people again."

Fiona glanced over at the two, curled up like a pair of bagworms.

"I understand."

"Saying that, after you have done what you want to do, I might have three people like this."

"Right… I hope so. Thank you."

"Let's sleep. It is time to say good night."

"Yes."

Fiona blew on the lamp. The basement was engulfed in darkness, the silence broken only by the sound of blankets being pulled over.

"Good night." Said Benedict.

"It's been so long since I've had a chance to say this." Fiona said. "Good night."

* * *

The endless curtain of snow suddenly weakened overnight, and came to a stop before dawn. Early-morning stars began to sparkle in the sky, now nearly empty of clouds.

In the pitch-black basement, Benedict checked his watch. The phosphorescent hands glowed dimly in the dark.

"It's almost time…"

He slowly pulled back his blankets and quietly sat up. Putting on his coat, Benedict walked slowly and groped around the table. He found a match and lit it, then lit the lamp. The room was instantly filled with light. The first sight to greet Benedict was the line of skulls on the shelf.

"…"

With a wry grin, he exhaled. His breath escaped his mouth in a visible puff. Rolled up in blankets on the mattress next to his was a black-haired woman. He turned. Two people were lying on the mattress behind him.

"…"

Benedict's eyes narrowed in amusement as he stared at them for some time. He then crouched down next to Fiona and stared at her sleeping face. Eventually, he glanced at his watch and shook his head in defeat. He lightly shook Fiona's shoulders.

Fiona opened her eyes. Looking at Benedict, she blinked several times before sitting up.

"Have you slept well, Miss Fiona? It is a bit quite early, but it is now morning." Benedict said.

"Thank you. Did sleep all right?" Fiona asked, slowly getting up with her blanket over her shoulders.

"Look there." Benedict said, gesturing with his eyes at the mattress at the end of the room.

Fiona momentarily burst into laughter.

"Hah hah hah…!"

Wil was lying straight, pinned between the mattress and the blanket. There was an uncomfortable look on his face.

Atop him was Allison. She was lying perpendicular to him, with her stomach on his. Her blanket had fallen to the floor, under her knees, and her coat was on top of it. And for some reason, as Allison lay with her arms in front of her, she was wearing Wil's coat. Her face was pointing to the side, nearly impossible to see under her messy golden hair. But Allison was still asleep.

Benedict and Fiona looked on for some time.

"Actually, the way Allison sleeps…" Benedict began, whispering. "…That way is bad for your back."

"…Is that the problem here?"

“Well… should I wake the two people up?”

“I’d love to watch a little longer, but we don’t have time.”

“I understand. Let’s wake them.”

Benedict crouched down next to Wil and shook him by the shoulders. Wil’s eyes snapped open.

“Oh… good morning.” Wil said in Bezelese.

“Morning. Have you slept well?” Benedict replied in Bezelese and Roxchean. Then, “I will leave the last person to Wil.”

With that, Benedict stepped aside.

Wil looked up at the girl laying across his stomach.

“Ah. I *knew* something felt heavy.” He mumbled nonchalantly. It almost sounded like he was commenting on the weather.

Wil took hold of his coat—the one Allison was wearing—and began to shake mercilessly.

“Allison! Wake up!”

Allison’s blond hair slid in front of her face from the impact. But Wil continued to shake her by the shoulders.

Eventually, Allison sat up without warning. She sat on her knees for a few moments and slowly turned, looking at the now-freed Wil.

“Good morning.” Wil said to her.

“Oh. Good morning.” Allison answered reflexively. Her long blond hair, spilling over Wil’s coat, was a tangled mess covering half her face. Her visible eye was also half-closed.

“…”

Allison looked around herself.

“Hm…? Where are we?”

Wil thought for a moment before answering mischievously,

“We’re going to be late for dinner, Allison. We’re already out of time. I guess we won’t get to eat tonight.”

Several seconds later.

“WHAT?! Stupid stupid stupid Wil! Why didn’t you wake me up earlier?!” She cried indignantly.

“Because you always get angry at me if I try to wake you up.” Wil replied matter-of-factly, holding back a yawn.

“How many times do I have to tell you?! You have to wake me up anyway! Now we’re both going to be late for food!”

“Actually, I’m good. And we’ll spilt the punishment.”

“Argh… how could you be so relaxed?! This is why you’re always you! Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“All right, all right.”

“Once is enough!”

“All right.”

At that moment, Allison went silent like a finished clockwork toy. As soon as Wil pulled his feet aside, she plopped onto the mattress and fell right back to sleep.

“…”

“…”

Benedict and Fiona watched, first in amusement, then in shock.

“We used to do this all the time. We’d tire ourselves out playing during the day and pass out. Then we’d wake up too late for dinner. Allison’ll be up soon.” Wil explained.

Thirty seconds later.

Allison slowly sat up. She was scratching her head with her right hand, worsening the tangles. Her eyes were half-closed.

“Hm?”

“What are we supposed to be doing today, Allison?” Wil asked. Allison pushed her hair out of her eyes and looked at Wil, Benedict, Fiona, and the skulls lying in a neat row on the ledge.

“Um… let’s see… right. We’re taking the princess to the capital.”

“Good morning, Allison.”

“Good morning, Wil.”

It was almost bright outside. Everyone got ready.

Allison and Benedict put on their wristwatches and synchronized them.

Along with Wil, they tightly wrapped their coats around themselves, put on their hats and gloves, and tied their boots around the ankles so snow would not get inside. Benedict put his submachine gun in its case. Wil slung the bag with the handgun around his shoulder. Neither were prepared to open fire immediately. Wil had not even loaded his magazine.

Fiona was dressed in the same clothes as yesterday, though with Benedict's suggested addition of fur gloves and a hat.

The four sat around the table, eating the bread, jam, and hot tea Fiona had prepared for them. They made plans for their escape. Benedict drew a simple map of the village on the back of his poster.

"There is a very hard barbed wire in the forest beside the village. And here is a hole I made. It is right from the house in which Allison and Wil were jailed. The hole is about three hundred meters beside the house in which Allison and Wil were jailed. There are about four houses in the way. When we go inside the forest, we will not be able to be seen from the valley until we go to the lake entrance."

"Right. But how are we going to get into the woods without anyone noticing? This strawberry jam is to die for, by the way." Said Allison. Fiona thanked her. Wil blew on his hot cup of tea and listened carefully.

"First, Miss Fiona must go out and look. Are there some people walking around? This is Stage 1. Because it is winter, there are usually not quite many people outside at this time."

"And? Pass me a piece of bread, Wil. Thanks."

"If there are no people outside, we must move to the forest with Miss Fiona. We must be careful so they can't see us." Benedict said. He then scooped up a large spoonful of jam and stirred it furiously into his tea. Fiona's eyes turned to dinner plates.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh. In my country, we drink tea like this. It is delicious."

Wil added that some people in the West drank their tea that way. Benedict continued.

"Normally, we place jam on a dish and eat it beside our tea. But soldiers do not like slowness, so we put them together. Sweets help you be less tired, so we pilots enjoy them."

Fiona cringed. "Even if I ever become a pilot or go Cross-Mountain… I doubt I'll ever do that."

"Er… let me go on. The road is visible clearly from the house. So we will move in a line on the snow when we are going to the forest. We will hide our bodies."

"How?" Fiona asked. Benedict replied.

"I have a very good plan. It is the plan used many times by the military."

He took a sip of tea.

"Delicious."

* * *

The sun was rising, but it was still dark.

The deep snow fallen overnight, and the dim sky growing steadily brighter.

There was no one to be seen in the village. Houses covered in thick blankets of snow stood silently in a light fog. There was no wind, no chirping of birds. The torches in front of the houses' doors had all been extinguished, and no one walked the streets.

"A good plan, huh." Allison mumbled.

"Quiet, Allison." Wil whispered.

Something was squirming along the fields of snow. Small mounds of white, making their way across the white canvas. Though difficult to see, there were signs of snow being scattered in their wake.

Allison lowered her voice even more.

"A snowscape camouflage plan? These are just *bedsheets*."

Four objects were squirming through the snow.

They were people covering themselves with bedsheets. Fiona had prepared the sheets for everyone. They had their feet tucked into the folds, moving awkwardly while looking ahead through small openings in the front. They moved for a distance, then stopped, then began to move again and stop. Benedict was in the lead, followed by Fiona, then Allison, with Wil bringing up the rear.

They had traveled about a hundred meters since leaving Fiona's house.

Being in the lead, Benedict cleared their way through the snow while watching their feet as well. When they reached an embankment by a field, Benedict scattered snow over himself and slowly slid down first. The others followed after. Four mounds of white gathered under the small slope, huddling together in conversation.

"Are you all right? Are your backs not hurt?" Benedict asked. The others shook their heads.

"We are half to the end. Let us be strong."

With that, Benedict continued to lead.

Slowly but surely, the sky grew bright. The four mounds carefully passed by one of the houses.

"It's going better than I expected. I'm impressed." Allison said quietly.

The mounds pressed onward.

Eventually, they passed by a large tree and arrived at another embankment covered with a heap of snow. Benedict stopped and carefully poked his head out of the sheets, surveying his surroundings. He then slowly withdrew behind the cover of the embankment.

There were fifty meters to the forest now. There was a single house standing in their way. To their left was the village hall and the steeple—the center of the village.

Benedict waited for Fiona, Allison, and Wil to catch up with him before speaking.

“There is one house past this pile of snow. And there is one middle-aged man outside the house. The man is holding a rifle. The man must be the guard. This is not a good situation.”

Fiona cut in quickly.

“Don’t shoot any of the villagers. Don’t kill anyone. Do you understand?”

“I understand, but I do not want us four people to be shot with guns. No matter what, I think we need your help, Miss Fiona.”

“What are you planning?”

Benedict whispered something to her.

He then gestured for Wil to come over.

“Please give back that handgun. In trade, I will give you this submachine gun.”

The man was standing next to the house with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He looked to be over forty years of age, and was wearing winter coveralls, earmuffs, and a pair of gloves as he sat on a simple chair in front of a wooden wall. His gaze was locked on the upper side of the village.

Suddenly, something moved in the snow-covered field next to the house. Though surprised at first, the man quickly stood and took his rifle in his hands.

“…”

As he stared a hole through the snow, someone came forward with his hands in the air. He was followed by Fiona.

“Please don’t shoot.”

“Fi?” The man gasped, lowering his rifle. The man with his hands in the air was a stranger, whose hat was firmly pressed over his head. Fiona was standing behind him, holding him at gunpoint.

“Walk faster.” She said, giving the man a push on the back. The man lost his balance and rolled down the pile of snow. Fiona carefully made her way down after him.

The villager looked on in shock.

“Get up and walk. Stop over there.”

Fiona forced the man to the front of the house.

“Wh-what happened, Fi? Who is this?” The villager asked. Fiona slowly approached him.

"I heard a strange noise on the first floor this morning and went to see what it was. That was when I found this man rummaging through the pantry. He listened to me once I pulled out my gun. This is the man you were talking about yesterday, right? Are there any others?"

"…"

The villager was lost for words.

"I wonder if this is going to work."

"Who knows…?"

Wil and Allison poked out their heads from behind the piles of snow, still covered under the bedsheets.

Fiona had forced Benedict to the house, and was now talking with the middle-aged man standing guard there.

"Wil. If this doesn't work out, fire away on your submachine gun. We'll make our getaway in the commotion. What do you say?"

Wil suddenly felt the full weight of the submachine gun on his back.

"No. Fiona said we shouldn't shoot the villagers."

"I knew you'd say that."

"And how're we going to cross the lake without Benedict's aerosan?"

"True."

As they watched, Fiona deftly snuck the gun over to Benedict. He immediately held the villager at gunpoint. Fiona grabbed the astonished man's rifle.

"Mission complete." Benedict said, punching the man in the solar plexus. The man collapsed in a heap.

"All right!" Allison cried, ready to leap out of the snow. At that moment, the villager fell to the ground. And,

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The cacophonic sound of empty tin cans clattering together echoed through the valley.

Fiona flinched at the noise and turned to Benedict, shrinking back.

"Wh-what is this?"

"Look at this man's back."

Fiona did as Benedict instructed. There was a white line attached to him. The line was tied under his arm, and was connected to a tin pail. The pail was rigged to clatter if the man fell.

“Amazing. The villagers are incredible.” Benedict mumbled in Bezelese.

“They’re on to us! Run!” Wil and Allison cried simultaneously. They flung aside the bedsheets and leapt down the slope. Allison slid down expertly. Wil rolled.

“Wh-what do we do?” Fiona asked, clutching the rifle. Benedict jammed the empty handgun into his pocket and received the rifle.

“They’ve certainly found us.”

He then pulled out the bolt, a component necessary for opening fire, and tossed it into the distance.

“So let’s run!”

The moment Benedict spoke, the door opened and three men in their forties rushed outside without even their jackets.

Benedict pushed Fiona ahead of him to keep her safe. Fiona reached the wall and climbed up the pile of snow that had slid down the roof. Benedict followed after her, carrying the rifle.

“Stop!” The men cried as they gave chase.

Benedict reached the top of the snowbank and turned. The moment the first of the men began to climb, Benedict said in Roxchean,

“I am very sorry.”

Then, he took the rifle in both hands and slammed the stock against the diagonal support under the eaves.

The support bent slightly. That was enough. Unable to withstand the weight of the snow, it broke. The eaves folded as the snow atop them fell in waves.

“Urgh!”

“Whoa!”

The two men who were reaching for Benedict were buried in the snow. Four feet stuck out of the pile, struggling to move.

Once the snowfall ceased, Benedict met the third man’s gaze.

“Save them fast, please. They can suffocate to death.”

The man paled at the reminder and began to desperately dig at the snow.

“Don’t worry. We will give the rest to that man.” Benedict said to Fiona. He threw aside the rifle and gave her a push on the back.

Allison and Wil quickly caught up to them. Benedict pointed at the forest ahead of them.

“Run run run! Let’s escape!”

“You don’t need to tell me twice! Let’s go, Wil!”

Through the deep snow, they made a desperate run for the woods, with Allison slapping Wil on the back and Wil being slapped on the back.

At the stone steeple.

Underneath the sharpened roof was a small space surrounded by four straight pillars. Though the area was actually used for lighting a beacon fire, this time two men were standing there. One was a white-haired man who was already past sixty. The other was a tall, bald man who looked to be well over eighty.

Both were holding rifles—rifles equipped with scopes for hunting and sniping. The older man knelt with one foot in the front, and took aim.

Through the scope he could see people fleeing. A man leading a familiar woman by the hand.

The crosshairs overlapped with the side of his face.

The old man hooked his finger onto the trigger.

Having waded furiously through the snow, Allison, Wil, Benedict, and Fiona were only three meters from the tree at the forest entrance.

There was an explosive noise, like a whip cracking right next to their ears. It was followed by the sharp sound of gunfire.

Benedict fell forward without warning. Fiona, following after him, almost trampled him.

“Duck!” Benedict howled, sitting up and pulling Fiona onto the snow.

Allison followed suit, pushing Wil to the ground from behind and ducking down next to him.

“Pfft! What was that?” Wil asked, spitting snow out of his mouth.

Benedict said to Fiona, whom he had pulled to the ground.

“They are firing guns.”

“They’re shooting at us.” Allison said to Wil, whom she had pushed to the ground. There was another sound, accompanied by gunfire. Snow spewed into the air from right next to Benedict.

“Let’s crawl on our stomachs. Behind that tree over there.” Benedict said, giving Fiona a push.

The two of them crawled across the snow and huddled behind the tree.

Benedict poked out his head from the shadow of the tree and surveyed the direction of the village.

“Move faster! Duck your heads!”

Soon, Allison and Wil crawled over the snow, with Allison spurring on a teary-eyed Wil. Benedict beckoned them behind the tree and looked back at the village. He could not see the men they buried in the snow. The steeple was visible to their far right.

“That’s where they’re shooting from…” Benedict mumbled.

At that moment, a bullet shot through the trunk. Splinters flew. Benedict withdrew behind the tree and grumbled.

“Damn it.”

Another bullet.

“Why don’t we just shoot the man? It doesn’t matter who he is—we could just say he died in an avalanche.”

The steeple. The white-haired man was talking to the older man.

The older man did not answer, instead driving another bullet into the tree trunk. He then pulled back the bolt with unbelievable fluidity, removing the empty casing and loading the next round.

“We *cannot* let her see such a grisly sight. We can kill the man later. Send the others in their direction.” The old man said, taking aim at the tree.

“Understood, Elder.”

The village elder pulled the trigger again. He did not reload. He quickly exchanged his gun with the one in the white-haired man’s hand. He took aim at the tree again.

Behind the unfortunate tree being pummeled by gunfire.

Benedict was clinging to the back of the trunk. Huddled behind him was Fiona, with Allison and Wil lying on their stomachs behind them.

Benedict quickly looked around at the woods, searching for the tree he had felled last night.

“…”

And he found it.

“Miss Fiona.” He said.

“Wh-what is it?”

“You have a white-colored handkerchief, correct? Please let me borrow your handkerchief.”

“What’s wrong? W-were you hit?”

“No. I am fine. The problem is that my handkerchief is green-colored.”

“What?”

Another shot pierced the tree trunk. Fiona flinched.

“I will surrender with a white-colored flag.”

“Why?! We’re nearly there—we’ll make it into the woods if we run for it!” Fiona cried. Benedict quietly shook his head.

“I just checked and confirmed it. The hole I made is completely covered. They already knew my plans from the start. They certainly missed us on purpose when they were shooting their guns at us. We are in a corner. They must think I kidnapped you or persuaded you, Miss Fiona.”

“…Why would anyone want to kidnap me?”

“Have you ever borrowed a big sum of cash from the people?” Benedict asked with a chuckle. Fiona replied with utmost gravity.

“No.”

“Do you hear me, Allison? Wil? We are going to surrender. Is that all right?”

“Y-yes.”

“Fight to the bitter end!”

Wil and Allison replied simultaneously.

“In favor, two. Against, one. No vote, one. The democracy means we are going to surrender.”

“…”

Allison frowned and clicked her tongue.

“I am sorry, Miss Fiona. I did not know that the villagers here are very skilled. After we surrender, please explain to the villagers. And—”

“And…?”

“In exchange for taking you to the capital, we got food and mattresses to sleep. But I did not protect your promise. I am sorry. I want to apologize and pay you back some day, so please come to my home.” Benedict said, handing a small note to Fiona.

“…”

Fiona looked at the note incredulously.

Then, she slipped it into her pocket with a chuckle.

“I’ll keep it for now, but I can’t guarantee I’ll need it yet.”

“I feel very complicated.” Benedict replied.

It was nearly day. The icy-cold blue of the sky towered over the white valley.

About forty people carrying rifles, handguns, planks, and shovels approached the woods. Most of them were in their forties or older. Among them were the man Benedict had knocked out, the men buried in the snow, and even the woman who had tricked Allison and Wil at the village entrance.

Allison, Wil, Benedict, and Fiona poked out their heads from either side of the tree and looked on. Shots had not been fired since Benedict took out and waved the white handkerchief.

“Everyone here is old.” Allison commented in spite of the situation.

“I’m the only young person in the village. I’ve always had to play with the adults, ever since I was little.” Fiona said.

Wil listened to Fiona as he watched the villagers draw near. Benedict handed him the empty handgun. Wil quickly slipped it into his bag.

The villagers were lined up before the forest. Eventually, a bald man—who arrived later than the others—addressed the people behind the tree.

“Good day, everyone. Please, come on out.”

“Well, I do not think they will shoot their guns suddenly now. Let’s go.” Said Benedict, slowly getting to his feet.

“I don’t believe this. I’ll get in trouble if I don’t join up with my unit today.” Allison grumbled from behind. “Let’s go. I wonder if they’ll lock us in the basement again?”

With that, Allison took Wil’s hand and helped him up as he was lost in thought—or rather, she forcibly pulled him to his feet.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure they don’t.” Fiona said, stepping out into the open first. She took off her hat and gently fixed her messy black hair. She held out her left hand as though protecting the others behind her.

“If you’re going to shoot these people, you’re going to have to go through me.”

The villagers exchanged shocked glances. The elder spoke up.

“We have no intention of shooting them. We just want to ask them some questions. Come over to us, Fiona. Leave the rest to us.”

Fiona smiled.

“No.”

A wave of worried confusion spread throughout the crowd.

“Stop getting in my—in *our* way.”

“Wh-what are you saying, Fiona?” Said the plump woman who had met Allison and Wil at the village entrance, stepping forward. “Those outsiders must have said something to trick you. Please, Fiona—don’t act like that. Please listen to the Elder.”

“No. And don’t call me Fiona. That’s just what everyone here calls me.”

“What do you—”

The woman froze mid-sentence. As the villagers looked on in shock, Fiona spoke.

“My real name is Francesca. And I am the princess of this country.”

Fiona said no more. She stood there resolutely, with the villagers frozen in shock before her. The clear morning sky, mere minutes before daybreak, was a beautiful dark blue.

“I wonder how they’ll react?” Allison wondered.

“Who knows?”

“Who knows…?”

Benedict and Wil replied quietly.

An old man stepped forward.

“Did those people tell you that? That you’re not actually a country girl, but the princess who died in the fire ten years ago?”

It was the tall, bald man—the village elder.

Fiona shook her head.

“I figured it out myself. No… I *remembered* it myself.”

Several seconds of silence followed before the elder spoke again.

“Then what are you going to do?”

“I asked these people to take me to the rally at Kunst today, so I can reveal the truth. They agreed. This man here is the hero who discovered the mural. He said he’ll take me to the capital by aeroplane. I’m going to announce my survival in front of the entire city. I’m sure I’ll make the radio broadcast, too.” Fiona answered.

The villagers held their breath. But the elder looked Fiona in the eye, unflinching. Time passed in silence. Not even the wind howled through the valley.

The elder finally closed his eyes in defeat.

“Do as you wish, Fiona.”

The villagers turned to him, bewildered.

“Elder!”

“You can’t be serious, sir!”

“Elder!”

“Chief!”

The elder lightly waved off their fears.

“Fiona is twenty years old now. She has grown into a fine adult. We are not to interfere with her actions, whatever they may be. Am I wrong?”

No one could respond. The elder took a glance around the crowd and turned back to Fiona.

“Fiona.”

“Yes, Elder?”

“You heard me. You are free to choose your own path. But remember this—if you go to the capital, but fail to accomplish your goal…”

He took a deep breath.

“…Then come back to this village, Fiona. This valley is yours. This village is yours. We will all be waiting for you, no matter what you decide to call yourself.”

Fiona nodded sadly.

“Thank you, Elder…”

“What’s going on here, Wil?”

Allison and Wil were looking at one another in confusion. The former was poking the latter in the side.

“I’m not sure… yet.” Wil replied.

“Mr. Hero.”

The elder said to Benedict, standing behind Fiona.

“You said you’d take Fiona to the capital. Can we take that to mean that you’ll also take responsibility for her safety?”

Benedict nodded.

“It is the soldier’s duty to protect people. I will protect Miss Fiona, without worrying who she is. I promise it as an officer of the Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force.”

"Then I have nothing more to say. Fiona. Are you ready?"

Fiona nodded. The elder called over one of the men—the bearded fifty-something man who had lied to Benedict the other day. The elder ordered the man to take Fiona and her party to the lake. The man, who had a rifle slung over his back, nodded.

"This way, please." He said, sounding surprisingly deferential.

Benedict stood by Fiona and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Can we go?"

"Yes."

Side-by-side they began to walk toward the villagers. The villagers parted, making a way for them. The two slowly made their way through the path. The villagers watched in silence, each and every person looking just about ready to cry.

Benedict turned.

"The two people over there, too."

Wil and Allison finally snapped out of their reverie. Exchanging glances, they quickly followed after Benedict and Fiona. They awkwardly walked through the path cleared by the villagers.

Allison suddenly spoke up.

"Oh! My bag!"

A middle-aged woman quickly produced Allison's bag from a sack. The man standing beside her spoke.

"This is yours, isn't it? We're terribly sorry."

"What?"

"We haven't touched anything inside. Your Air Force-issue gun is in there, as well. We saw your identification. You really were from the Roxchean military, weren't you? It was our fault we mistook you for an intruder. Please forgive us."

"Huh? …What's going on?"

"We're so sorry. Please, take care of yourself." The middle-aged woman said, handing Allison her bag.

"Wha…? Thank you."

As Allison took the bag, astonished, the man spoke again.

"We'll make sure to send your car back to the military by today. Where should we take it?"

"Huh? Oh, umm… to Mushke, please."

"I understand. We'll have it sent to the Mushke post office."

"Thank you…"

"We're so terribly sorry."

"…"

Allison was confused. Wil watched the villagers in silence. Soon, they made it to the end of the path cleared by the crowd. The villagers watched the five people depart.

Their eyes refused to lose sight of them, even as they disappeared down the slope of the road.

The man leading Fiona and the others said absolutely nothing until they left the valley and reached the lakeshore.

Fiona wiped away tears once or twice along the way. When Benedict quietly handed her his green handkerchief, she accepted it.

Not even Allison, walking at the very back, said a word. The atmosphere wouldn't allow it. On occasion she looked at Wil, walking next to her in careful thought, and pulled him back onto the road whenever he went astray.

When they were nearly out of the valley, the sun rose above the eastern mountain ridge. The light shining down on the Central Mountain Range instantly changed angles, hitting the frozen lake in the hollow.

"Argh… this is way too bright." Allison complained, putting on her sunglasses.

The group left the valley and stepped down onto the lake. The frozen plain stretched endlessly before them.

Benedict turned to the place where he had parked his aerosan.

"What…?"

He frowned. There was nothing there.

"What's wrong?" Fiona asked from behind.

"Er… I, hmm… This is very strange."

The bearded man pulled the rifle from his shoulders.

"Please excuse me. Cover your ears." He said to Fiona. Waiting for her to follow his instruction, he fired two shots into the air. Soon, they heard a single gunshot from the distance. The man fired again.

"Please give us a few minutes. Our friends will be here with the aerosan."

Benedict shook his head with a bitter grin.

“What?” Allison asked.

“Er… well… I’m sorry.”

“You all are very skilled. I can only be surprised.” Benedict said to the man.

The bearded man did not reply; he only glanced at Benedict.

Soon, two horses carrying one man each emerged from behind a ridge connected to the lake, pulling the aerosan behind them.

“Hey, isn’t that from this side?” Allison asked. Wil asked her what she meant. She explained that the aerosan was a vehicle used by the Roxchean military for traversing snow-covered areas.

Benedict explained to Fiona that they would take this vehicle to the encampment near Mushke.

The bearded man said something to the two men who brought the aerosan over. The two men looked at Fiona in shock, but their surprise quickly gave way to sadness as they nodded.

The men untied the ropes they used to haul the aerosan and pulled off the cloth used to protect it from snow. One of the men went inside to do something, and came back out.

“We’ve put things back so the fuel tank is connected and the battery is usable.”

“…”

Benedict climbed inside. Allison and Wil peeked in.

“Squeeze in a little more.”

Pushing Wil into the corner of the tiny aerosan, Allison followed with her legs bent before her. Benedict put his submachine gun in the shelf. He then called to Fiona.

“Let’s sortie.”

Fiona looked back at the three men.

“Thank you all so much.”

The men said nothing, only smiling gently. The bearded man gave his hand a light wave, beckoning her to go. Fiona ran to the aerosan, took one more look at the men, and climbed inside. She poked her head out of the hole in the roof and waved at the men. She watched them wave back at her.

“Ready? Are you sat down? Are the doors locked?” Benedict asked the cramped trio. “It will be a little noisy, but please endure it for a short time.”

He started the aerosan. Several loud roars later, the engine sputtered to life and the propellers began to spin.

It slid across the morning lake, roaring across the ice.

The aerosan disappeared into the distance, spraying snow in its wake.

The bearded man finally broke his silence as he watched.

“She’s gone. …To think that we’d have the honor of seeing her away.”

The three men lowered the rifles they had slung on their shoulders. Holding their rifles with both hands, they held them over their chests toward the departing aerosan.

Chapter 6: Fakes

The blue roofs of the city and the frozen lake.

And the tents of the Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force, erected a hundred meters from the lakeshore.

The sun shone brilliantly over the city and its residences.

The little aerosan made its way across the lake and toward the city, scattering snow in its wake.

Benedict brought the aerosan to a stop in front of the guard station. He then turned off the engine.

Fiona opened the door and stepped outside first. The guard on standby was shocked. By the time Allison and Wil followed Fiona out, the guard was flabbergasted.

Benedict was the last to disembark. The guard finally saluted.

"Good work today. Take care of the aerosan—the gun is inside."

Benedict saluted back and pointed at the aerosan.

"Yes, sir. Er… about your pa-"

"My passengers? They're important guests of mine. We're going in." Benedict said curtly, and gestured for the others to follow him.

They passed by the surprised guard and entered the encampment on the ice.

"What will you do, Allison and Wil?" Benedict asked. Allison, still wearing her sunglasses, responded.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"The capital, I mean. They will quickly prepare an aeroplane. Will we go together? But Wil might be difficul- I mean, troubled. You do not need to try too hard. I will make contact with you later."

Allison answered.

"Well, we're feeling pretty tired now. I guess we could—"

"I'll go!" Wil cut in.

Allison turned, bewildered.

"I'll go with you. Take me along."

“Is that so? What will you do about school in that case?” Benedict asked, amused. Wil’s answer was simple.

“Who cares?”

“…”

Allison gaped at Wil as though he were a creature from outer space.

“I understand. And you, Allison?”

“Huh? Of course I’m coming along!”

“Very good.”

Allison went up to Benedict and whispered to him—in Bezelese.

“You know, I really don’t like sitting in the passenger seat. And we really don’t want to play third and fourth wheel. So, uh… could you get another plane ready for us, Major?”

Benedict thought for a moment, and asked Fiona for her understanding—as he could not express such a complicated answer in Roxchean, he would speak in Bezelese for a moment. He then turned back to Allison.

“To be honest, that might be difficult. Even I can’t ask the men to prepare a craft for a pair of outside personnel. Asking for one craft is a challenge already.”

“I see.”

Allison sighed. But Benedict continued.

“But—”

“Yes?”

“I might be able to ask them to warm up two crafts so I can decide later which one I want to fly.”

“Oh, really? And?”

“Miss Fiona and I will take off on one of them, but make an emergency landing because of engine trouble. Once everyone rushes over in a panic, there might not be anyone left in the hangar area for a while. Then some sneaky outsider might end up commandeering the second aeroplane. That won’t be good.”

“It’d certainly be a disaster.”

“Yes. But once everything is finished and I explain the situation, I’m sure I’ll get off with just a pay cut and a demotion.”

“I see. You know, I’ve been wanting to try that two-seater you flew before. Will I ever get a chance, do you think?”

“I hope so. Nice weather today, don’t you agree?”

"It's certainly nice today."

As Wil watched the pair whispering excitedly, Fiona came over to him.

"What are they talking about?"

"I can't hear them very well from here, but from the look on Allison's face, I think… she must be…"

"Yes?" Fiona asked.

"…She must be up to no good." Wil replied.

"Welcome back, Major."

"Good work, Captain. Ah, these people are my guests."

In front of Benedict's tent, they ran into the bespectacled captain. Standing in a row behind Benedict were Fiona, Wil, and Allison.

"We received shelter at a nearby village last night. Apologies for not contacting the camp overnight. In any case, I'd like to take my friends out on a flight." Benedict said.

"P-pardon?" The captain stuttered.

"I was thinking of going on a sightseeing flight. I'm not sure yet if I want to take everyone on the new observation model or my own craft, so I want you to prepare both. Right now." Benedict said matter-of-factly. The captain was clearly flustered.

"P-please, sir. The crew spent all day yesterday doing maintenance on the crafts for departure tomorrow. If you take them out today, our schedule—"

"I understand that, Captain. You'll just have to have the technicians work on them overnight today. Get the crafts ready."

"But—"

Benedict glared, holding up his pointer finger.

"Captain. This is an order from a superior officer. Bring both crafts out of the tents and warm up the engines. That is all. Be quick."

Benedict did not even wait for an answer to his command. With a glance at the captain's clearly uncomfortable expression, Allison went up to Benedict.

"Looks like your reputation's going to take a hit, Mr. Hero."

Benedict smirked.

"I'm only a fake, anyway."

"Not at all—you aren't to me and Wil, at least. And maybe to her, too."

"Hm?"

Suddenly, he found himself meeting Fiona's worried gaze. He walked over to her.

"Umm… Are you sure this is all right? Won't you get in trouble if you do this?"

Benedict smiled in reply.

"Yes. I will be in big problem—er, *trouble* for doing something which I am not to do."

"…"

Fiona could not come up with a response. Benedict continued.

"But Miss Fiona. If you have to choose from what you want to do, that is going to the capital, and getting me in trouble, which should—er, would you pick?"

"…Take me to the capital."

"I understand. Let us prepare to go to the capital."

Benedict led the three to his tent.

In front of the rectangular tent.

Two aeroplanes were pulled onto the ice side-by-side.

One was the green craft that Benedict had flown the other day. There was a beacon drawn on the side of the fuselage, modeled after the mural.

The other craft was the new observation model Benedict chose. It was used for observing areas that had been accurately bombed, simple scouting missions, or transportation of personnel.

The observation craft was a little longer than the fighter craft, but in terms of design it lacked the sleek agility of the fighter.

The frame was a murky green, tinted with brown. There was cloth draped over it. The cockpit was narrow, and housed a small engine. On either side of the frame were flat windows. On top were the main wings, which looked rather like a pair of long planks. The landing gear sticking out from under the frame was installed, not with wheels, but skis. Multiple supports crisscrossed the gap between the landing gear and the main wings.

The repair technicians got to work on the two crafts, looking quite disgruntled. They checked the fuel and the securing devices, and one technician climbed into each of the cockpits to warm up the engines. The propellers began to spin.

"I can hear the engines. Let us wait the short time and sortie." Benedict said as they sat inside the tent.

Over his black uniform he wore a leather aviator jacket, which was thinner than his coat. He was holding his uniform hat. Allison was holding a leather aviator hat, a pair of goggles, and a white muffler.

"Thanks for letting me borrow these."

"You are welcome. There are no windshields in that aeroplane. It can be very cold. Please be determined before you fly that aeroplane."

Wil was wearing Benedict's flying coveralls. He tied the ends that were a little long for him, and wore an aviator jacket that Benedict had borrowed for him. Wil was also carrying a Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force-issue aviator hat, goggles, and muffler.

"I understand. But Allison will be flying the second craft, right? …Is this really okay?" Wil asked nervously.

"It's going to be all right." Allison said.

The four walked up to the two aeroplanes in front of the tent. The engines had been shut off, and the planes were ready to fly.

The soldiers glanced nervously at them as they passed by the other tents. The female soldiers whispered quite audibly amongst themselves, anxiously speculating about the woman walking next to Benedict.

"Well, please do not worry." Benedict said to Fiona.

"This… this is all right." She replied.

"I understand. Now, that will be the plane we ride on."

Benedict made his way to the observation craft. Thanking the bemused soldier who reported the completion of preparations, he ordered the soldier to climb down to make room for him and Fiona.

Benedict opened the door on the right side of the cockpit, which was quite high up, and sent Fiona inside first. He followed after. He shut the door, and sat on her left. They put on their seatbelts.

Benedict opened the triangular window on the side of the cockpit and stuck out his head, checking his surroundings. Then, he started the engines. The two propellers broke out into a spin. The lightweight craft trembled as it began to taxi.

As forty or so soldiers watched, the observation craft headed for the communications tent. It moved slowly and smoothly between the red-and-white pylons on the ice.

"Hm? Weren't you going to join the major?" Asked the bespectacled captain, noticing that Allison and Wil were watching from next to the repair technicians.

"The lady who came with us hasn't been on an aeroplane before, so the major's going to give her a gentle tour first. Once they come back, he's going to take us on the fighter craft one at a time for some acrobatics." Allison lied with a smile on her face.

“I see… May I ask a question? Who is that woman who came with you?”

Wil answered.

“We can’t say yet. But you’ll know soon. I guarantee it.”

“Of course…” The captain mumbled. At that point, the observational craft passed by the communications tent and went into full throttle. It lifted off the ground after a very short taxi.

The craft ascended for a time. But suddenly, the engines cut out.

“What?”

As the soldiers watching the flight began whispering anxiously, the craft’s main propeller stopped. The aeroplane broke out of its ascent and fell, making a landing on the ice. It continued forward for some time, before finally coming to a sideways stop.

“Oh no…”

“Are they okay?”

“No one’s coming out…”

“The engines cut out!”

“Did something happen?”

“Let’s go and help.” One person finally said, and with that as the signal, the soldiers scrambled to the observation craft. About twenty people traversed the frozen lake to reach the aeroplane. Those who remained had their eyes locked on the craft in worry.

Allison looked around. Making sure that almost no one in the makeshift hangar was watching, and that the people near the second plane were all distracted by Benedict’s craft, she tugged on Wil’s sleeve.

“What is it?”

“Never mind. Let’s go.”

Allison and Wil went behind the frame of the aeroplane and crouched out of sight. Telling Wil to wait there, Allison climbed under the plane. She unfastened the craft and returned.

“Climb up and take a seat. Put on your seatbelts and fasten the radio mic. You remember the order, right? Once you have your seatbelts on, give me a signal. Okay?”

“Huh…? Right.”

“Then go! Now!”

With that, Allison climbed up to the cockpit, using the wing and the foothold on the side of the frame. Wil followed after her and struggled into the back seat. Allison fastened her seatbelts in the blink of an eye and brought the microphone to her mouth. She put on the headphones and put her aviator hat and goggles atop them.

As Allison finished preparations, Wil re-adjusted the bag on his shoulders and finally put on his seatbelts.

“I’m done with the seatbelts.” He said to the front seat, and put himself to work in setting up the radio. Just as he was putting the microphone next to his throat, the engine came to life, spewing fire.

With a deafening roar, the aeroplane slid forward. The soldiers turned in shock. For a moment, they watched the craft taxi right by their eyes.

“S-stop! Who’s on that craft?!” A large sergeant first class in his thirties cried. A young soldier replied that they were guests of the major.

“What?”

“Well… I saw them climb on, but I thought that might be all right…”

“And you call yourself a soldier?! They’re taking a Royal Air Force aircraft! Shit! Someone give me their car keys!”

“We’ll be borrowing this.” Allison said to the confused soldiers on her left, though they obviously could not hear her. She turned to her right. Pylons were set up in a straight line leading to the side of the communications tent. In the distance, the propellers on Benedict’s observation craft were beginning to spin again.

<Allison, can you hear me?> Wil asked via the communication device connecting the two seats.

<I hear you. Are you ready?>

<I just need to put on my hat and goggles.>

<Put ‘em on tight, okay? We can’t have them flying off.>

<All right. Anyway… is it really all right to take the aeroplane like this?>

<Sure. The major gave us permission.>

Benedict’s craft began to taxi once more, taking to the air in the blink of an eye. The soldiers running toward the observation craft stopped, relieved at the sight of the plane taking off again. Then, they noticed the second plane rushing in their direction and leapt off the runway in panic. And in confusion at the identity of the pilot.

Allison raised her seat as much as she could for a good field of vision and continued to taxi down the runway.

But just as she made it halfway—

A truck cut in from the side, stopping in the middle of the runway, scattering snow in its wake. The large sergeant first class was sitting in the driver’s seat, shouting something. Obviously, Allison could not hear him. He was bellowing, “You’re not getting away!”.

“Hey! Move!”

Naturally, the truck sat steadfast in the middle of the runway.

"Wh-what is he up to?!" Allison complained, pushing her engine further.

The plane sped up. Angling the nose slightly to the right, Allison taxied the plane along the edge of the runway. Then, she made a hard left. The rear wheels of the plane slid as the craft did a 180.

<What's going on, Allison?>

<The runway's been blocked!>

"Huh?"

Wil turned. The first thing he saw was a truck. There was a well-built man in front of it, saying something to the other soldiers. Everyone was rushing their way.

<What's going on? It looks like the repair technicians are coming after us.>

<They are.>

<What? Why?>

<Because no one gave me permission to fly this craft! Me and the major just came up with this trick! Argh, we were so close, too!>

"…"

"Move! Move!"

The aeroplane passed by the hangar and the soldiers, and crossed the encampment with a roar of the engine. The soldiers watched in shock.

<Wh-what do we do now?>

<The runway's a no-go.>

<Then could we go off to the side and use the ice?>

<The problem is, they piled up snow on either side of the runway when they cleared it. We can't get off the runway.>

<What? Then…>

Allison looked out at the vast field of snow and ice.

<That's right! We've got all that space in front of us, but we can't use an inch of it!>

<Then… could we head into town and find ourselves a makeshift runway?>

The aeroplane had left the encampment, and was on a path leading straight into Mushke. Snow was piled up on either side of the road. There was a soldier standing blankly next to the guard station.

<We don’t have enough distance.>

<Allison. There’s a truck coming after us.>

Allison turned. It was just as Wil said.

<Argh! We can’t turn back now! …Even if we make it into the city, there aren’t any straight roads in there.>

<No. The roads are wide, but they zigzag through the city.>

<Why couldn’t they have been more *considerate*?!> Allison howled.

<They *were*.> Wil answered earnestly.

The observation craft was flying comfortably overhead.

“What? What’s going on?”

Benedict watched in shock as the aeroplane on the ground headed to the blue city. A truck was driving up behind them.

“Damn it…” He muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Fiona asked, finally breaking her silence after going quiet during takeoff. There was a very small gap between their seats, and they were sitting nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. The roar of the engines was loud, but not enough to make conversation impossible.

“It is nothing. …But we might in the end go to Kunst in a pair.”

With that, Benedict put on his headphones.

<Allison, can you hear me? You’re heading toward the city right now.>

<I know that!>

The voice on the radio reached Wil as well. He cringed at Allison’s screeching.

<Could you do something about those people coming after us?> Allison asked. But Benedict’s answer was cold.

<No. Is there anywhere without snow piled up?>

<If there was, we’d be in the air by now!>

<That’s unfortunate. …I’ll land somewhere and you two can come onboard. We have two passenger seats left.>

<Argh, dammit! We were so close! We even managed to taxi down the runway! My reputation’s going to take a nosedive!> Allison wailed. Wil chimed in.

<Your reputation hasn't even taken off yet.>

Benedict heard Wil's comment. He chuckled wryly.

The city on the lakeshore approached rapidly. Ahead of them was a ramp. The road led past the docks and into the downtown area.

"Nosedive… nosedive… That's it!"

Allison's eyes lit up as she looked out at the city from behind her goggles.

<Wil! Wil!>

<Wh-what is it?>

<The map of Mushke! Do you remember it?>

Wil shut his eyes for a moment, then opened them.

<I think so.>

<Then could you give me directions?>

<Where to?>

<That place you were supposed to go to today!>

<Y-yeah… I think so. But—>

<I'm counting on you!>

<Huh…?>

Allison gave the left throttle lever a gentle push. The propellers began to spin faster. The aeroplane rushed even faster toward Mushke.

"Sir! They're not stopping!" The young soldier driving the truck said to the indignant sergeant first class.

"Follow them anyway!" The sergeant first class roared.

Benedict looked down from the observation craft.

<Allison? What are you planning?>

<We're getting out of the city and taking off. That is all!>

"But how?"

Benedict surveyed the ground. White roads zigzagged through the blue roofs.

<Which way, Wil?>

Wil had unbuckled his seatbelts and was sitting on the frame to see. The wind from the propellers sent his muffler billowing behind him. Wil hooked his legs through the seatbelts so he wouldn't fall, and hung onto the frame with one hand. His face was pale.

<T-take the first right!>

With its wings spread wide, the fighter craft began climbing up the ramp. Allison pulled the throttle slightly. The plane went forward at walking speed, entering the city. Houses were on either side. The roar of the engine filled the streets. Soon, they came to an intersection. Allison veered to the right.

"Move! Out of the way! Coming through!" Allison cried loudly. An elderly woman sitting on the steps in front of a store looked up at the noise.

The aeroplane passed by the astonished woman. The shadow of the wing passed over her head.

<All right! Which way next, Wil?>

<Take a left at the second intersection. Then follow the road in a zigzag pattern for a while.>

<Got it!>

"Sir! What do we do? They're in the city!" Asked the soldier in the driver's seat. The truck had ended up following the plane into the streets as well. The aeroplane sped ahead of them, making a turn with a spray of snow in its wake.

"Follow them! Just keep going after them! They're bound to run into a dead end sooner or later!"

Next to the window of a house by the street.

A young boy was next to a round window in the stone wall. He was about five years old. The boy sat kneeling, looking down at the streets with his elbows on the frame.

From one side came the roaring fighter craft. Its engine filled the street with noise.

"Wow…!"

The boy's gaze went from left to right.

"Talk about a loud car…" The boy's mother said from further inside the house. The boy turned.

"Mommy! There's an aeroplane on the road!"

His young mother appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. The boy leaned forward, staring at the disappearing fighter craft.

"No, no, sweetheart. *Cars* drive on the road. Aeroplanes fly through the sky." His mother said with a smile. The boy moaned in confusion.

Then, he smiled.

"But it was just like an aeroplane!"

<Make a left at the big street ahead! It's a tight corner—d'you think you can make it?>

<That's not the issue here! We either make it, or we don't!>

The aeroplane continued down the narrow streets. There was almost no gap between the tips of either wing and the houses on the roadside. Passersby gaped as they looked up at the fighter craft.

The road met the large street at an angle. To their right was a very tight corner. About thirty meters before the intersection, however, a bus emerged from the left.

"Hey! You there! Stop that bus! Aeroplanes have right of way!" Allison cried. The bus started, but quickly stopped. The driver looked on incredulously.

"All right!"

Allison gave the throttle a gentle push.

<Sit down, Wil! Make sure you don't fall off!>

Just before the intersection, she pulled the throttle. Making sure that there was no one on the right side of the street as the tip of the wing passed by the corner of the house, she stepped firmly on the right pedal. The plane veered to the right.

"Whoa!"

Back in his seat, Wil held tightly onto the left side of the frame and resisted the centrifugal force. The left shock absorber was compressed, and the one on the right expanded. The frame, tilting to the left, resisted inertia and returned to level position with the rear wheel sliding sideways. The nose was pointed directly at the middle of the street.

"What the heck was that…? Whoever's piloting that thing is good."

Wil's friend, sitting next to the bus driver, mumbled to himself.

A truck rushed after the fighter craft.

<Amazing… excellent work, Allison.> Said Benedict.

<Thank you!>

The craft barreled down the street. People turned at the sound and scrambled to get away.

"Sorry! Get out of the way!"

<What are you going to do now? All you've got ahead is a winding mountain road leading to the pass.>

<I'm making a left before that. Do you know anything about this country's geography?>

Benedict gasped.

<…I see. But…>

<Major, I have a question. D'you think we could pull it off with this craft? Will it be okay?>

<The craft will be fine. But that's all I can guarantee.>

<Then that's that!>

The aeroplane left the street, the truck chasing after it. On either side were snow-covered forests. The road led to the pass in a gently upward slope.

<You're amazing, Wil! Now get back in your seat and buckle up!>

Wil did as he was told and fastened his seatbelts in the shaking aeroplane.

For some time, the road went on. Then, they encountered another road to their left. The road went diagonally in a gentle upward slope. On a little road sign buried in snow were the words 'To Slankalans Viewpoint'.

The aeroplane made a left. Allison pushed the throttle lever and taxied the plane up the cleared road.

<Wil! You know what I'm going to do, right?>

<I've got an idea… a terrifying one.>

<Then I'm going to tell you something, in case we fail.>

<What is it?>

<'Sorry I messed up'! Okay! I apologized in advance!>

"…"

Wil looked up at the sky. Benedict's observation craft was cruising comfortably through the air. He mumbled to himself.

"I never wanted to get into a mess like this… whether it was this month or this time next month. …Why didn't I just volunteer for that other plane?"

There was a parking lot at the top of the slope.

At the edges of the rather wide lot were signs bearing messages like ‘Reconsider! For the people who love you.’, ‘Come to us for counseling -The church’, and ‘Don’t throw away the lives your parents gave you!’.

Beyond the signs were chest-high wooden walls that surrounded the perimeter.

And beyond that was nothing.

“Sir! They’re heading straight for… uh… the cliff! Slan-something or other. They’re cornered!” The young soldier said, driving as fast as he could. The sergeant first class roared in triumph.

“Excellent! We’ll catch them for sure!”

<The parking lot is empty. You’re free to go.> Benedict said to Allison as he watched from overhead.

<All right. I’ll be off now.>

The fighter craft made one last turn. Ahead was a straight path leading directly to the parking lot.

<Are you ready, Wil? Buckled in?>

<Yes. I have my goggles and muffler on tight, too.>

<Then here we go.>

Allison gave the throttle lever a hard push.

The propellers began to spin furiously. The aeroplane sped up as though being pushed, climbing up the slope in one go and sliding into the parking lot. It then got faster.

“Let’s go!”

Allison pulled back the control stick, which she had pushed forward. The plane left the ground for a moment, but it did not have enough thrust to stay afloat. Just as the wheels skidded over the fence, the craft broke into a rapid descent.

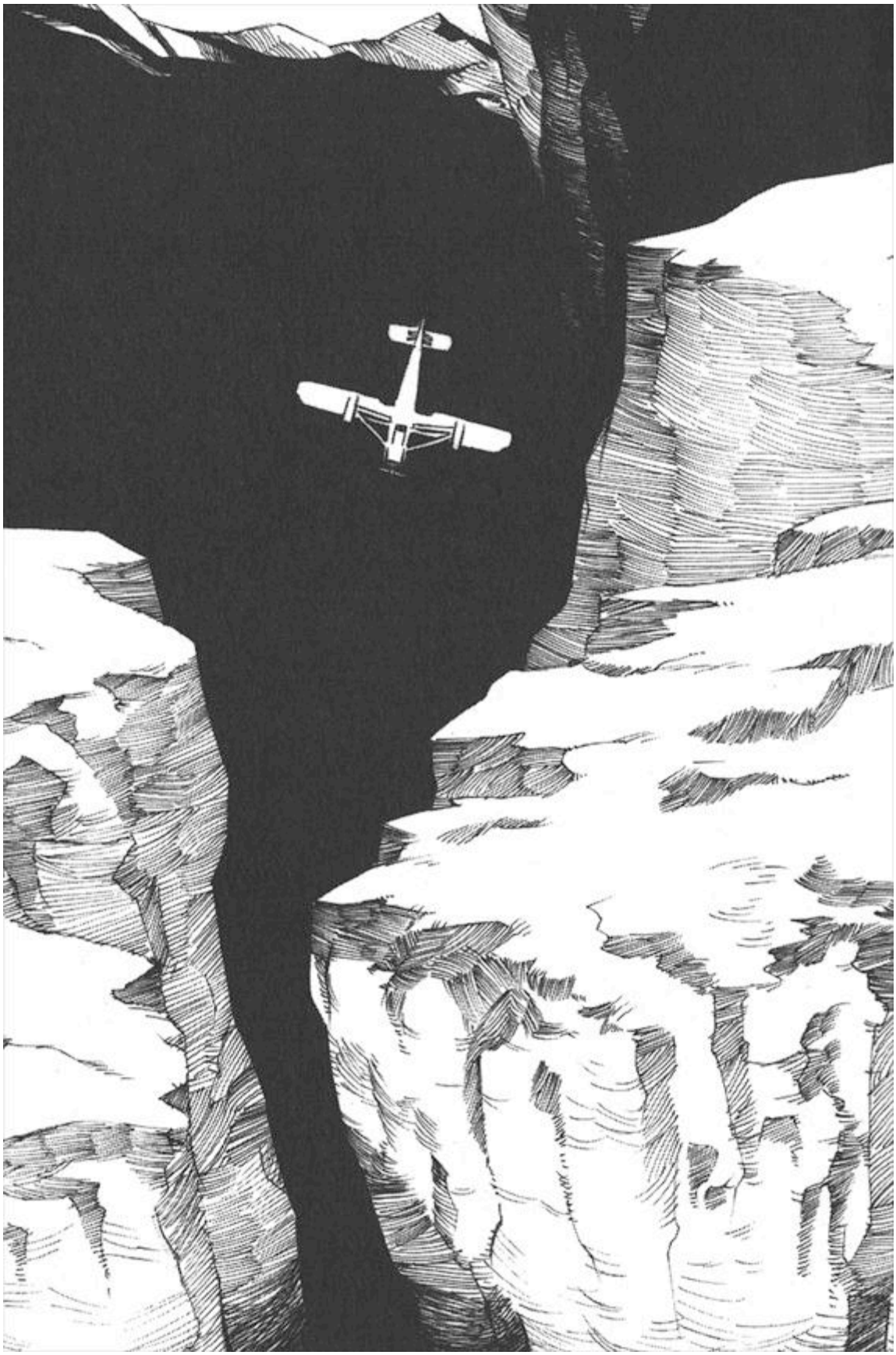
There was nothing there for eight hundred meters.

A great white valley by the nearly perpendicular cliff. A tiny object fell from a corner of the valley. It looked like a grain of dust falling off a table, but that particular piece of dust was carrying two people.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!”

“I’d lose my job if I tried this with my unit!”

The aeroplane fell at a dive, headed straight for the ground, as Wil screamed for his life and Allison cried out excitedly.



They were not far from the cliff. From the side, it looked almost like they were on a plane preparing to land. But in this case, the plane was pointed at the ground and the surface passing rapidly underneath was a rugged rock face.

As they gained speed with gravity, Allison pulled on the control stick. The surface of the cliff began to grow further.

The truck barreled into the parking lot and came to a screeching stop.

There was nothing there. There was no one there.

"Wh-what…? What just happened…?!" The sergeant first class cried.

"YEAH!"

Allison cried out in delight, pulling back the control stick. She broke out of the dive, returned to level position, then ascended rapidly. They could see the blue sky and the cliff from which they had fallen.

"There!"

Allison pulled the control stick to the side. The plane flew in a loop, and the sky and the ground did a 180 back into their rightful positions. The earth appeared just below the frame. The white viewpoint and the truck passed by underneath.

"…"

The sergeant first class looked up blankly at the aeroplane flying overhead.

* * *

Two aeroplanes flew side-by-side over the city of blue roofs. They were headed south along the lake.

<Sorry to keep you waiting.> Allison said through the radio, glancing to the side. Benedict returned the glance, looking at their aeroplane.

<That was incredible. I'll try proposing that as an emergency takeoff maneuver one day.>

<Thank you. Now, shall we go to the capital?>

<Before that, let me contact the encampment.>

Benedict changed frequencies and called the communications tent in the Sou Be-Il encampment. The soldier in charge of the radio was lost for words. Soon, the captain answered the call.

<Major! What in the world is going on here?>

<Captain. I decided that we needed two crafts after all. Do not come after us. I'm not going to explain anything. Over.>

After cutting the conversation, Benedict whispered to himself.

"…Wonder if I'll at least make first lieutenant now."

<Are you still alive, Wil?>

<Yeah… Barely.>

<Look! Look at that frozen lake, and the Central Mountain Range! You really get the best views with seats lined up like this.>

<Yeah. They're beautiful. They are, but… ugh…>

<What's wrong?>

<If nothing else… please promise me the landing will be normal.>

<Got it. Hyah! Inverted flight!>

<Whoa!>

"Are you all right? Is this aeroplane your first aeroplane flight?" Benedict asked Fiona, who was sitting to his right. She nodded stiffly. The aeroplane to their left, which had been flying upside-down, turned right-side-up again.

"Are you not cold?"

This time, she shook her head.

"I see. If there is anything uncomfortable, please tell me. Saying that, we will go to the capital."

Allison's fighter craft was flying on the left side of the observation model.

They maintained course over the lake so that they could make an emergency landing if the engines gave out, and continued south. They could clearly see streets and power lines. Beyond was a snowbank with coniferous trees dotting the slope. And to the side, rocky, snow-covered peaks that reached even higher than the aeroplanes' current altitude.

<Hey, Wil.> Allison called.

<Yeah? What is it?> Wil answered, enjoying the view. Allison glanced over at the woman sitting in the observation craft to their right.

<Do you really think Fiona is a princess?>

Wil answered that he wasn't sure.

<I don’t really know, but… even if she isn’t, there must be a reason she’s so desperate to go to the capital. I have no idea what that might be, though. And now that we’ve come this far, I want to know.>

Allison nodded, satisfied, and pressed the call button.

<Yeah. We’ve come this far—might as well go to the capital and see things through to the end.>

<Yeah. But what are we going to do once we get there? How will we find the rally?>

<I don’t know. Maybe we’ll have to land on the lake again? There’s a Roxchean encampment a little ways away from there. We’ll ask the major later.>

Flying the observation craft, Benedict glanced at his watch. Them, he checked the fuel gauge and was about to look ahead.

“Hm?”

He noticed Fiona’s left leg trembling to his right. Her right leg, as well. He looked up and saw Fiona, her hands closed over her chest. Her hands were also shaking. Her face was frozen stiff in trepidation and fear, and her eyes were locked on the instrument panel.

“You have something very important hiding on your chest, do you?” Benedict said.

“What?” Fiona looked up, surprised. Benedict smiled.

“You put your hand on your chest often. When you saw the advertisement and when you said you are a princess to us.”

“Yes… you’re right. I’m surprised you noticed.” Fiona said, her face still set.

“There is no need to worry like you do now.”

“I’m sorry for getting you involved in something like this.”

“What do you mean by ‘something like this’? I have the honor of carrying Her Highness of this country.” Benedict replied in good humor.

Fiona’s expression loosened instantly. Her eyes narrowed and she smiled.

“…”

For a moment, Benedict lost himself in her smile. Then, he joined her in a grin. Fiona looked at him and finally spoke, the smile never leaving her lips.

“I’m a fake.”

* * *

The observation craft flew over the lake with a pleasant roar, carrying Benedict and Fiona.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean exactly what I said. I'm not the real princess. Princess Francesca died ten years ago."

"Er… but you are still going to the capital, yes? And in front of many people, you—"

"Yes. I'm going to lie to them. I'm going to tell them, 'I am Princess Francesca!'."

"…Knowing that well, you still want to do it?"

"Yes. I do."

"…But why did you tell to me that you are fake?"

"Because… whether my plan works or not, I want at least one person to know the truth."

"…"

"If it's all right, could you hear out the rest of my story?"

Benedict replied,

"There is still much time before we arrive in the capital."

<Major, I wanted to ask you something. What are we going to do once we get to the capital?>

He received a message from Allison.

<Sorry, I'm a bit busy right now. I'll get back to you later.> He replied, cutting the conversation short.

Allison frowned and looked over at the observation craft.

Benedict looked flabbergasted. He said something to Fiona, who nodded firmly.

"What are they talking about?" Allison grumbled.

"Incredible… how could it be?"

Inside the observation craft. Benedict looked up at the sky with his back against his seat, mumbling in Bezelese. He unconsciously pulled back the control stick, and the aeroplane ascended slightly.

He quickly realized his mistake and returned the plane to level position.

Then, Benedict turned to Fiona and said in Roxchean,

"Surprising… I was very surprised. Yesterday and today, many things happened, but this was the most surprising. I have not been surprised this way since I saw first the mural."

"So you believe me…? Thank you." Fiona said, smiling. Benedict responded in a loud voice.

"Of course I believe you! Now I know everything. Who you are, and why you say you are the Her Highness, and the reason why you want to go to the capital. I understand everything completely. I was surprised."

Then, his voice dropped to a whisper.

"I was surprised…"

Fiona spoke up.

"Carr Benedict. You're a historic hero whom everyone admires and trusts. I'm glad that you're the one who shares my secret. I'm so glad I told you. I feel so much better now."

Fiona was wearing a smile full of calm serenity. But Benedict grinned wryly and looked her in the eye.

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"Miss Fiona. I want to tell you one truth also. It is about the heroic action of discovering the mural."

"…"

"Just like you are not the real Her Highness… I am not the real hero."

His gaze turned to the aeroplane flying to their left.

"What do you mean…?"

"Will you endlessly listen to my awful Roxchean?"

Fiona chuckled.

"You said that we still have a lot of time before we reach the capital, right?"

<They look cozy in there. What are they whispering about?> Allison wondered, glancing over at Benedict's craft.

<Who knows?> Wil answered without a hint of sarcasm.

"I… I see…"

"Yes. The real heroes are the two people Allison Whittington and Wilhelm Schultz, who are flying over there. Another hero is the old man, and after him the noblewoman that helped the two people. I am only the hero after them."

"I can't believe it…"

"Are you disappointed that I am not the real hero?"

"No… I'm not. I was surprised about those two over there, but you've done so much, too. But why are you telling me all this?"

"Miss Fiona. The people in the world believe I am a historical hero. They treat me like that. That is reality. I… I sometimes hate being a fake hero. I rather want to go back and be a normal person. But I heard your story and changed my thoughts—er, mind. Even if I am a fake hero, I am glad I am a hero. Do you know why?"

"No… why?"

"Because I have a honor of carrying this country's Her Highness to the capital to present her to every person. Because I know your secret, it will not be enough to only carry you there. While we are at it, let us make this the show to remember. I have a good idea."

"Man…"

Allison cruised slowly as she kept a keen eye on the two on the observation craft. Benedict said something to Fiona; Fiona flinched in surprise, and replied; then she nodded, satisfied.

Wil sat behind Allison, looking down with unending wonder at the arc of the lake, enjoying the flight. To his right he could see two shadows moving side-by-side down the surface of the lake.

"…"

He then glanced up at the sun, and pressed the call button.

<Allison.>

<What?>

<What time is it now?>

Allison looked at her watch and the clock at her seat.

<There's a bit of time left until lunch. But I'm starting to get a bit hungry.>

<Me too. But that's not what I'm talking about—it's going to be Night soon. Is it okay for us to keep flying? It might be dangerous if it starts when we arrive.>

<Huh? Ohh… That was today. Right. But I can't exactly ask right now—the major's not picking up.> Allison grumbled.

"That is all of my plan. How is it? The choice is up to you. Do you want to try it?"

"Yes! I'll do it." Fiona answered immediately. Benedict nodded.

"All right. Let us succeed for certain. For Her Highness Princess Francesca, who is not in this world anymore."

"Yes!"

"That is that, and… I am happy even if this is after everything is done, but… I have a request."

"What is it?"

"Will you go out with me?"

"What?"

"Let us go out together. A fake hero and a fake princess. Does it not go well together? Before, when I wooed women, I often asked them, 'Would you like to go on an aeroplane ride?'… But I cannot say that anymore. I think I must think of other lines."

"What…? Yes. Let's. But are you really all right with someone like me?"

"I do not want anyone but you. You are very beautiful."

"That's… the first time anyone's said that to me."

"The people of your village must have bad eyes. Or perhaps they worried that if you knew you are beautiful, you could tell them, 'I will go to the capital and become an actress'."

"Really? I always assumed they didn't want a country girl like me to embarrass them by leaving the village on my own." Fiona said abashedly.

Benedict responded, his face the picture of gravity.

"You are very beautiful. May I kiss you?"

"What…?"

One person watched as two people kissed inside the small observation craft.

"This is not fair…!" Allison cried, forcing her gaze back to the front. There were the beautiful white mountaintops and the lake, and the clear blue sky. Her craft's engine roared and its propellers spun loudly.

"This is not fair!" Allison repeated herself. She glared to her right again. The two people were facing one another. The woman smiled, embarrassed.

Allison looked back. Wil was behind her, absently looking down at the ground.

<Why?! Why are our seats lined up like this?!> Allison cried, accidentally pressing down on the call button as she grabbed the throttle lever.

Wil looked up and met Allison's stare.

<What? You just said this was the best configuration for enjoying the view…>

"…"

<You were right, Allison. It's cold, but the view from here is really—>

<Hold on to your seat!>

"Whoa!"

Benedict looked forward again. The fighter craft was pulling into an acrobatic maneuver.

It broke into a sudden reverse dive, then shot back up again in a corkscrew before falling sideways at the peak.

Then, a vertical descent followed by two consecutive loops. Fiona's head turned twice as she followed the sight.

The fighter craft returned to level position and sped up.

Each time Allison's arm, holding the control stick, smashed to the right, the craft rotated 90° to the right and returned to level position after four turns.

The craft ascended and descended several times, before finally joining the observation craft again.

<This is Benedict. Allison, do you copy? Is everything all right?>

<Oh, Major! I'm just fine.>

<I was more concerned about Wil, actually. He's still alive, right? Answer me if you're still there, Wil.>

<J…just barely…> Wil answered in a dying voice. Benedict shrugged and passed a headset hanging from the instrument panel to Fiona.

"Put this on."

Fiona paused, then put on the headset.

<Allison. Fi is also hearing, so I will speak Roxchean. I will tell you how to do once we enter the capital.>

<All right.> Allison answered quickly. Then,

"'Fi'?"

"'Fi'?"

She and Wil wondered aloud simultaneously.

<Anyway, what do you have in mind, Major? If we're going to make a landing on the lake, should I borrow a car from my unit somehow?>

Benedict answered immediately.

<No, you have no need to borrow it. The rally takes place on a balcony in a major street. It is at the end of the rather long and wide path, yes?>

<Umm… yes. I've been there before, when I went to sm- uh, I mean, go shopping.>

<Of course. Then we are decided. We would like to make a landing there.>

<What? …Say that again, Major?>

<We would like to make a landing there. It is too much time to go from the lake to the downtown, and most of all, we would like to attract much attention. Then it is the best to go there with this aeroplane.>

<Are you serious?>

<Yes. I am serious. I decided this with Fi before, when we talked. The princess comes down from the heaven. Isn't it wonderful?>

"…"

Allison turned to Wil. This time, Wil shrugged. Allison pressed the call button.

<We understand you're being serious, Major. And we're not going to object. But the street's going to be full of people.>

<Of course, we will ask the people to move from the street. If it is this craft, there is plenty of time to escape while it cruises over their heads before it lands. I will ask them loudly to give me twenty meters of space, and it will work somehow.>

<But when I went there two days ago, I noticed police officers on security detail on the street. They're on high alert, seeing as there's so many people around. We're flying Sou Be-Il aeroplanes—what if we get shot before we even land? Isn't this really risky?>

Benedict paused.

<Police officers… I understand. It is not very sweet news. I do not care about me, but I cannot allow Fi to be shot with guns. Damn!>

<Do we really have to go straight into the rally?>

<Yes.>

<Then… how about I go in first and lure the police away?>

<You may still be shot with guns. Er… Hmm. Fi says that we must not be so dangerous. Whether we go on land or sky, we must not kill anyone, she says.>

<I know that, but—>

<Night.>

Wil spoke over Allison. He addressed the others via radio.

<It's going to be Night soon. Couldn't we use the darkness to fly in covertly?>

"Oh!" Allison exclaimed. <That's right! We could do that! Wil and I were talking about it just a little while ago. It's almost time for Night.>

"Night?" Benedict wondered, frowning. <Did you just say 'night'? It is only lunch hour. I do not understand—>

Benedict's voice cut off suddenly. Allison turned, and saw that Fiona was telling him something. She saw Benedict nodding in understanding. Soon, he called back.

<I understand. I know now. That is what you call it in Roxchean. I did not learn that word yet. A 'Midday Night'. Wil, do you know the precise time?>

<Yes. Our class was supposed to observe it from Slankalans, actually.> Wil replied, and repeated the time. Benedict glanced at his watch.

<That is good. We will proceed with the operation.>

Allison told Benedict everything she knew about the street. It stretched from east-southeast to west-northwest, and was about twenty meters wide. The straight stretch of the road was about a hundred meters in length, and lining the sides were two-story buildings and one large theater at the very end of the street, which had a wide balcony on the third floor.

She also explained that, in the capital, the wind blew in a nearly straight line from east to west. Then she informed him of landing procedures used by the Roxchean Air Force.

<That's about it. I'll keep an eye out while you land, so contact me if anything happens. Is that all?>

<Yes. You were very helpful, Allison. Now, please break this craft's wing lights.>

<What?>

Benedict turned on the lights on the observation craft. The two lights on the tips of the wings and the tail light flashed on.

<Like this, they will see even in the dark. It is good to be seen from behind, but I cannot allow people to see from the front. But because I cannot turn on the tail light alone, please break the wing lights.>

<How? You want me to fly in and clip them?> Allison asked, closing their distance. Benedict evaded to the right.

<That is somehow scary, so I will decline it. Wil. You have the handgun I gave you? Could you shoot the gun from there?>

Wil, surprised to be called on, quickly looked into the bag he had in front of him.

<I-I think so, but…>

<Then I ask you to shoot, Wil. Attach the stock to the gun, load the rounds into the magazine, and shoot the gun from below my aeroplane. There is no fuel in the wings. But I would be happy if you only shoot once each time. Can you do it?>

<Do you take me for a fool? I could complete such a task with my hands tied behind my back.> Allison said. Wil scolded her from behind.

After a moment's thought, Wil agreed to shoot the lights. Taking off his gloves, he loaded the magazine and attached it to the gun. He mixed up the direction once, but he managed to attach the stock to the grip as well.

<I'm ready.> He finally said. Benedict asked Allison to fly under the observation craft.

<Please do not crash your aeroplane into our aeroplane.>

<I know.>

Allison slowly maneuvered under Benedict's plane. First, she approached the left wing from behind. Wil held the gun in his right hand and put the stock on his shoulder. The gun shook in the wind, so he put his left hand on it for support and took a deep breath.

<Easy, Wil. Relax. You don't need to answer me.>

Allison cautiously and expertly operated the controls. The distance between the two planes narrowed.

If one of the aeroplanes were to make any sudden movements, the two would crash in midair. But the gap closed without any unnecessary turbulence. Allison and Benedict concentrated solely on each other's crafts, piloting with vigilance.

Wil aimed up and undid the safety.

Bang.

The crisp sound of gunfire melded into the roar of the engines. An empty shell casing flew into the air. At the same time, pieces of the broken wing light scattered toward the lake.

<Awesome!>

Allison slowly pushed the control stick forward. The fighter craft and the observation craft grew apart.

<Now the right side, please.>

Allison flew under the right wing, just like before. Wil took out the light in one shot again.

<Incredible. You are an amazing sniper!> Benedict exclaimed. Allison held her head high.

<Of course! He may not look it, but Wil took sixth place in the Kaashi Competition!>

<The… Kaathi?> Benedict repeated. Wil called Allison.

<He couldn't possibly know about it, Allison…>

Wil breathed a sigh of relief, the muffler still wrapped around his face. The slide on the gun was down fully—there were no more bullets left.

Benedict turned to Fiona.

“We are ready now. Now we must commence the operation.”

With her right hand clenched over her chest, Fiona looked at Benedict and nodded.

<I see it over there.> Allison said. Benedict and Fiona looked out at the scene unfolding before them, past the propellers. The snow-white lake was coming to an end, and a large blue mass emerged to its left.

It was Kunst, the capital of Iks.

Chapter 7: The Princess and the Hero

Two aeroplanes were flying in wide circles over the lake, a slight distance from Kunst. They continued to circle the air clockwise, a little less than two hundred meters above the ground.

The sky was a dark blue. Though it looked like the sun had set moments ago, the sun was still in the middle of the cloudless sky. But more than half of it had already disappeared.

<—must walk the path to independence. Thank you for listening.>

A round of applause. The newscaster repeated the name of the politician who just finished his speech. Then, the newscaster announced that the rally would take a short break due to the coming Night.

<After the break, we'll have a speech from the representative of the pro-Confederation side, Mr. Owen Nichto—>

Benedict turned off the radio and looked at Fiona.

"The rally is going just according to plan. And there are many people there, as well."

"…"

Fiona returned his gaze without a word.

"It is all right. There are two people who are looking down on you from above you, and here is someone who will protect you now."

With that, Benedict called to Allison.

<Are you ready?>

<We're good to go any time now. And it's a good thing Night is here on time. I was just starting to worry it wouldn't happen.>

<It looks like Night isn't a sleepyhead, unlike a certain someone here.> Wil chuckled. He then looked out of the aeroplane, which was tilting to the right, and up at the weakening sun.

Night was coming to midday.

The snow covering the ground began to go grey, and the shadows of the aeroplanes on the lake grew a shade fainter. The world began to lose light.

Benedict glanced at his watch and called Allison.

<Are you ready?>

<Anytime!> Allison replied immediately. Benedict looked to his right at the woman sitting next to him. She nodded firmly.

<Then let us go. Commence the operation.>

Benedict's plane returned to level position. The tilted world returned to normal. From a slight distance, Allison's plane mimicked his perfectly. The two aeroplanes began to descend. Dropping to one hundred meters over the lake, they passed the shore and into the sky over the vast capital city.

The compass on the instrument panel was pointed due southeast. With the wind against them, the two aeroplanes continued, casting dim shadows over the blue roofs.

In an alleyway in Kunst.

A man walking down the alley looked up at the sudden roar of engines. Two aeroplanes quickly flew past the long, narrow sky between one house and the next.

"Honey, come back inside. It's almost Night."

A woman called him in. The man did as he was told, his brow furrowing.

The dark blue sky grew even darker. The sun continued to shrink to the size of a pea, as though staggering in the middle of the sky.

Benedict's plane slowed as it cruised over the darkened city. Blue roofs covered in snow rushed past behind him.

Soon, the world fell into deep darkness. Relying on his instruments alone, Benedict continued cruising parallel to the ground.

* * *

There was a square stone building at the end of the street. It was a magnificent marble building that completely dwarfed the houses around it.

There was a large balcony on the third floor, on the side of the building that faced the street. The balcony jutted into the street in a graceful arc, its railings engraved with ornate designs.

Set up at the end of the balcony was a podium and a microphone. Behind it were about a dozen men sitting in a row of chairs. They were dressed in suits and coats, and ranged in age from their forties to early sixties. Among the men was the subject of the posters plastered all over the city. On either side of the men also were rows of seats—they were occupied not only by men, but women and children as well.

And standing in the area were police officers. They wore formal dark blue uniforms, and around their waists were belts form which hung truncheons and sheathed ceremonial daggers. They were not armed with guns. On their heads they wore long cylindrical hats.

In front of the spiral staircases stood two officers each. On the right side was a desk, and a large radio was set up on it. No one was sitting there. There were a pair of headphones hanging from the back of the chair.

In front of the desk stood an officer in his forties who had a stern look on his face. There was an extra horizontal strip on his hat, setting him apart from the others.

A younger officer came up to him and saluted.

“Did you call, Captain Warren?”

The middle-aged officer called Warren pointed at a little boy who sat on one of the side seats. The boy was swinging his feet excitedly.

“It’s almost Night. Keep an eye out on that boy and make sure he doesn’t fall off the balcony. I’ll take over this station.”

The young officer answered and saluted him, then went up and knelt beside the boy. They spoke for a moment, and the boy began to ask him for his hat. The young officer put his hat on the boy’s head. His little face slipped right inside. As the boy laughed, Warren smiled and mumbled to himself.

“That’s against regulations, but…”

He looked down at the street from the balcony. The crowds gathered there to listen to the speeches were standing idly, waiting for Night to end. There was an even mix of men and women in the group. Most were of voting age, but he also saw the occasional senior. The street was not completely packed. Grey clumps of snow were visible between the people. Their voices echoed in a low rumble.

Warren looked at his watch. Then he looked up. The sky was painted a dark blue, and the sun was the size of a pea. Two first-magnitude stars shone next to it.

As Warren watched, even the little speck of sunlight finally disappeared.

“It’s Nighttime.” He mumbled, enveloped in darkness so deep that he could no longer see the street.

The moon that circled the planet once every eight days often covered the sun on the first day of the month. The solar eclipse would give birth to Night.

The buzzing of an insect began humming in the dark.

The hum slowly grew louder, and eventually filled the entire street.

“What is that?” Someone on the street wondered, looking up at the darkened sky.

A second later, the moon passed by the sun. Faint light returned to the world as though a curtain was pulled back. A shard of sunlight began glowing brilliantly in the indigo sky.

And the people in the street noticed something overhead.

“?”

An aeroplane was flying above them.

It was cruising just above the two-story buildings, almost close enough to touch by hand. And it was moving like a slow bicycle—so sluggish that it almost looked like it was frozen in midair.

The people watched, wide-eyed and jaws dropping in shock, as the aeroplane followed the street and slowly approached the balcony.

"Wh-what is this…?"

Bewildered, Warren watched the plane from the balcony as it drew closer. Like a backdrop in a play appearing in a moment of darkness, the aeroplane materialized where there had been nothing before. An aeroplane in the middle of the road, its wings reaching to either side.

"It's going to crash…?"

Once more he was taken aback. The aeroplane did not look much bigger now than when it had first appeared. Gripped by the fear that it might come charging at any moment, Warren gaped at the craft before him.

But his reaction was no different from those of the other people around him. The eyes of the many people on the balcony were fixed on the aeroplane.

Hundreds of sets of eyes were on Benedict as he sat in the cockpit. He stared directly at the balcony and grinned.

The observation craft continued to cruise close to the ground. At the rate it was flying, it would soon crash into the balcony. Benedict opened the triangular window and poked his head outside. And he shouted as loudly as he could,

"Move! I'm landing!"

Everyone was instantly jolted to their senses. People scattered quickly from the area—some to the side, and others in the opposite direction.

Benedict took advantage of the gap left behind and began landing. Like a scene in slow motion, or like a craft being lowered by a crane, the aeroplane slowly approached the snow-covered street. Just before the skis hit the ground, he stopped the engine and the propeller. And he landed.

The suspension contracted as the craft hit the ground. The sound of creaking metal assaulted the ears of everyone on the street. The aeroplane slid forward, digging through the piled snow. It then came to a stop.

There were ten meters to the balcony.

No one was run over or hit by the aeroplane.

Checking that things were all right, Benedict looked to his right. Fiona was hanging on to the instrument panel, looking down at the ground.

"We've landed safely. No one is injured."

Fiona slowly rose, and in the darkness saw many people watching from all around.

"…"

"It is all right!" Benedict said loudly. Fiona looked at him. "No matter what some say, there is an historical hero beside you. You will succeed, Your Highness."

He winked.

Fiona clasped her hands over her chest.

"You're right. I know we'll succeed…"

She slowly closed her eyes. She clenched her fists.

Soon, Fiona opened her eyes again.

"Then let's be off, Hero of the Mural."

Benedict saluted her from his seat.

"Of course, Your Highness."

The light music playing on the radio broadcast was suddenly interrupted by the newscaster's frantic voice.

<An aeroplane! A small aeroplane has just landed in front of the balcony! I don't believe this! There are two people on the craft!>

<All right!> Allison cheered, drowning out the broadcast. Her aeroplane was circling overhead, climbing to a higher altitude. The moon was slowly moving past the sun, returning light to the world.

<This broadcast will temporarily give live coverage of this unusual incident that is currently taking place. For listeners who are just tuning in, an aeroplane has just landed in front of the balcony. Oh! Someone is disembarking. A young woman. And a man, as well!>

<Things are going really well! This is really awesome!>

Wil piped up from behind.

<Allison. An aeroplane needs to move forward to stay in the air—so you would need a long runway to land or take off, right?>

<Of course.>

<Then how did Benedict just land on such a short strip of road?> Wil asked. Allison explained.

<Here's the gist of it—that aeroplane is specialized for landings and takeoffs like that. It might look a bit dinky, but it's the latest in Sou Be-Il aircraft technology. In fact, if I wanted to steal an aeroplane and take it back to Roxche, that one Benedict is piloting will be more useful than this one. Everyone'd prefer it.>

<I see… But don't do it, Allison.>

<I was just giving an example. Anyway, I wonder what Benedict is planning to do now?>

<Who knows? All we can do now is listen to the radio.>

The newscaster continued.

<The police have the aeroplane surrounded. Oh! The man from the craft is saying something. The man is wearing a black military uniform. He's shouting at the crowd!>

The aeroplane stood like an ill-fitting sculpture in the middle of the road. And from its side emerged a man and a woman.

Around them were whispering crowds and several police officers. On the balcony, the newscaster clutching the microphone and everyone else who was seated there had run over to the railings to have a look at the commotion.

Night slowly came to an end, and light returned to the eyes of the people, who had only just adjusted to the darkness.

Benedict helped Fiona climb down from the aeroplane. Then, he escorted her at her side.

The moment two officers stepped forward carrying truncheons,

"Everyone! Everyone here!" Benedict cried in Roxchean, spreading his arms wide. The officers stopped, and the crowd began to stir.

"Everyone! Policemen! I am Major Carr Benedict of the Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force! Some call me the Hero of the Mural!"

That was enough to strike the crowd into awe. People whispered in excitement.

"The hero…"

"It's the hero."

"Wow, he's handsome."

"Is he for real?"

"It's the hero…"

The officers exchanged glances.

“I am very sorry for the loudness! But I wished to come to this place somehow! People of Ikstova! Good day!”

With that, Benedict took off his hat and waved it in the air. He was greeted by a round of applause.

<This is incredible! Ladies and gentlemen, it’s the hero! The Hero of the Mural, Major Carr Benedict! What could he possibly be thinking? I repeat, Major Carr has stepped off the aeroplane!> The newscaster babbled in excitement. In the background was the sound of applause.

Allison was still circling overhead.

<Talk about Mr. Popularity.>

<It’s not surprising. I just don’t think I could have survived all that attention.>

<That’s understandable.>

<Ladies and gentlemen, the Hero is currently speaking to the chief of security. The young woman is still next to him. From her clothing, she seems to be from Ikstova herself. She had black hair, and… Oh! She is being escorted onto the balcony by Major Carr. She’s coming this way!>

“Hey! Call the captain! Major Carr’s at the capital!” Someone called in Bezelese.

In the communications tent in the Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force encampment, a soldier listening to the radio was giving his subordinate orders. The subordinate rushed out of the tent.

“What is going on here?” The soldier in headphones wondered, setting aside his duty of receiving radio transmissions from the Roxchean military and turning his attention to the radio.

Soon, the captain ran inside. His glasses were sliding down his face.

“Elder…”

“Shh. We must listen quietly to the end.”

In the snow-covered village in the valley, almost every villager was gathered in the hall with the wooden table, staring up at the radio.

The elder said quietly,

“This, too, is part of our duty.”

With the eyes of the crowd locked on them, Benedict and Fiona appeared on the balcony. Not only the crowd on the street, but also the politicians and women and children who were on the balcony greeted them with curious stares.

The officer who escorted them up saluted Warren.

"Good work. Take care of the aeroplane."

With his orders, the officer returned to the street. Warren took off his hat, and with a curious look at the woman fiddling with her hair, first saluted Benedict.

"Captain Warren of the Kunst Police Force. I'm in charge of security detail today, Major Carr. We… weren't expecting a visit, I'm afraid."

"You must know that we Sou Be-Il Air Force were doing a joint training session on the lake. I have some words I wish to tell everyone. So I came."

"That's—"

Leaving Fiona at Warren's side, Benedict walked up to the middle of the balcony and spoke to the politicians who greeted him.

"It's an honor to meet a hero like you, Major Carr."

Though each person was different, the greeting was always the same, each time followed by self-introductions. Benedict courteously responded to each person and shook their hands one by one.

Among the people he greeted was a man in his forties with his black hair slicked back. When he introduced himself, Benedict reacted.

"I know you. Your advertisements were sticking all around the city. Mr. Nichto, without your advertisements, I would never have known it and I would never have come here. Thank you."

The man—Owen Nichto—smiled just as he did on the photographs.

"It is an honor, Major Carr. I can't say I was expecting you to drop in, but would you perhaps care to join me for dinner after the rally?"

Benedict flashed a practiced smile.

"Of course, Mr. Nichto."

Once he finished shaking hands with all of the politicians, Benedict grinned at the women sitting nearby. And with their excited screams at his back, he headed for the podium.

<Major Carr has just finished speaking to the Members of Parliament, and he is now going up to the podium. He seems to have something to say. Major Carr.>

Allison spoke.

<Say, you think maybe he's planning to say something like, 'I'm not a hero! Those two tricked me into this mess! Help me!' or something like that? Maybe he was waiting for his chance, and he'll prove his innocence and leave Fiona standing there! Wait, that's it! He'll seek asylum in Iks! So he can get all lovey-dovey with Fiona in that protected village! I'm kinda jealous.>

<How do you come up with these ideas, Allison…?> Wil sighed. Then,

“A protected village, huh…?” He wondered to himself.

<Everyone, good day. My name is Carr Benedict. I am a major in the Sou Be-Il Royal Air Force. I am called the Hero of the Mural.>

<It’s starting.>

Allison continued to circle overhead.

The sun was almost back to its full size and intensity.

Benedict spoke into the microphone on the podium. His voice carried through the speakers and radios at the rally.

“For arriving rudely suddenly, I am very sorry. And my Roxchean is very weak—er, bad. I am very sorry. I am doing my best to speak.”

The crowd burst into laughter. One of the politicians whispered to his neighbor, “Look at that popularity. I hope he puts in a good word for the Independence Faction.”

“I came to this place because there is something I really wish to tell everyone! Everyone, will you listen to this intruder?” Benedict asked the crowd. The people cheered agreeably.

“Thank you! Then from now on, I will speak something very heavy. Here is someone I wish to introduce to you, but also the people listening to the radio!”

Benedict went over to Fiona, who was still standing next to Warren. He took her by the hand and slowly escorted her to the podium. The only people on the balcony who didn’t look confused were Benedict, Fiona, and the little boy who was swinging his feet.

Fiona and Benedict stood at the podium. The crowd went silent. Everyone looked at them curiously.

The newscaster narrated the events as they happened.

<Major Carr has just brought his companion up to the podium. What are they planning to announce?>

Benedict cleared his throat. Every last whisper was silenced.

“This lady is the person I wish to—I mean, the person I am very humbled to have a honor of announcing!”

There was a dramatic pause, before Benedict finally broke the news.

“Let me announce… the one daughter of Her Late Majesty the Queen; the first person in line to the throne of Ikstova, Princess Francesca!”

The silence at the rally was broken by the voice of the bewildered newscaster.

<D-did you hear that, everyone…? I… I don't know what to say… Er…>

<He said it! Yeah!>

<What's he going to do now, I wonder?>

"You all are surprised, right? That is not impossible. When I, too, heard the fact from Her Highness Princess Francesca, I was very surprised. Because I knew that she left this world in a fire ten years earlier!" Benedict continued. The politicians behind him exchanged glances. Some among them frowned visibly, while others could not bring themselves to pick up their jaws off the ground. Warren, standing off to the side, stared fixedly at the back of Fiona's head.

"But! But Her Highness Princess Francesca ran away from the trouble and was safely alive. But because of the scary experience, she lost her memory, and lived as a normal village lady all this time!" Benedict explained energetically. A young officer hesitantly came up to Warren.

"Should we stop him, Captain? Shouldn't we?"

"Not yet." Warren replied.

"But…"

"I'll take full responsibility. But let them finish."

<I met that Princess Francesca by chance and exchanged words together. And Princess Francesca said that she wants to show her face to you all as soon as she can. I also agree. That is the reason why I invaded a rally.>

Allison banked to the side, and along with Wil, looked down at the tiny streets.

"There should be many people among you all who think, 'I cannot believe this'. But I can say for sure! This person here is Her Highness Francesca in the reality! I am finished. I will step back now."

Most of the gazes directed at Fiona were dubious, yet tinged with the minute hope that Benedict was right.

Fiona looked around at the people and took the podium that Benedict offered her.

And just as she opened her mouth,

"I object!"

Someone cried from behind her. Fiona quietly turned, not surprised in the least.

<Oh! Mr. Nichto is walking up to Major Carr!> The newscaster announced.

Other politicians also stood at once, but Nichto gestured for them to stop. Then, stopping the other politicians who seemed to have wanted to say something, he approached the podium.

Nichto drew nearer to Fiona. Benedict stood in front of her, getting in his way. He pulled the microphone stand over from the podium and placed it between himself and Nichto.

"What is the matter? Mr. Nichto."

Nichto answered into the microphone.

"I have no business with you, Major Carr. Nor do I have any business with the young lady."

He took the microphone stand and went up to the podium.

"Everyone!"

Pausing for the crowd's attention, Nichto continued in a commanding voice.

"Everyone! Though it pains me greatly to suggest, I believe we cannot allow Major Carr to continue. Some among you may wish to hear him out further; but we can no longer stand idly by as the people and the Royal Family of Ikstova are insulted. Do you not agree?"

Some expressed agreement at the proposal.

"Unfortunately, Her Majesty and the Royal Family of Ikstova left us ten years ago. It was a tragic incident, but a historical fact nonetheless. I'm sure I speak for everyone here when I say that it took us a great deal of time to finally part with the sorrow of their loss."

Nichto shot Benedict and Fiona a glance. Benedict smiled and held out his hand, urging him to continue.

Nichto turned back to the crowd. Hundreds of people gave him their full attention.

"Unfortunately, our hero—Major Carr—doesn't seem to have thought so far, being from another land. It is very unfortunate indeed."

Then, he moved the microphone and said to Benedict,

"Did you know, Major Carr? That countless people have come forward in the past decade, claiming that Her Highness the Princess, or Her Majesty the Queen were still alive? Each and every case, however, was a lie and a fraud. They were trying to make a profit from the respect and patriotism our people have for the royal family. And for your information, everyone who came forward claiming to be one of them also claimed to have memory loss of some sort. Doesn't that sound familiar to you, Major? I don't know why you think that this country girl is Her Late Highness. Perhaps you were fooled by her into believing that you made another historic discovery here in our remote country. But let me say this: the people of Ikstova will not stand for any more trickery. Please leave us before our anger finally boils over."

Nichto finished. Benedict turned to the crowd. Many were clearly disappointed. Some were even getting angry.

"He's right!"

"We don't need any outlanders trying to fool us!"

Though a vocal minority hissed at him, most of the crowd listened in silence.

Nichto moved the microphone stand back to Benedict.

"Do you have anything to say, Major Carr? If not, I humbly ask that you leave us today. We are in the middle of a political rally. It is a serious affair that will decide the future of our country. Would you like to say something?"

Benedict shook his head.

"Nothing."

"I see. Then if you would—"

"I said before, '*I* am finished. *I* will step back now'."

Nichto scowled at Benedict's interruption. The latter gave Fiona a gentle push on the back and had her take the microphone.

"Mr. Owen Nichto."

Her voice carried from the speakers and the radios, as did Nichto's.

"Yes, young lady? If it is not too much trouble, would you give us your name?"

Fiona glared and answered curtly,

"'Francesca'."

Nichto sighed loudly.

"You still insist on keeping up this charade. No citizen of Ikstova would be ignorant of how impudent it is to claim to be a member of the royal family, even if they have already passed away."

"Of course. I know that very well."

"If you truly are Her Highness, then answer me this. How did you survive the fire, and how did an orphan survive alone all this time? And where? We will not be satisfied with anything less than a complete explanation—but I suppose your unfortunate memory loss prevents you from telling us. Although, strangely enough, it seems that you still remember that you are a princess, Your Highness."

Fiona remained silent in the face of Nichto's sarcasm.

"This is a shame. It seems—"

But just as Nichto turned to the crowd,

"My memories."

Fiona suddenly spoke. Nichto stopped and turned.

“My memories begin at about nine years ago, after the fire at the royal palace.”

“Ah, yes. Your convenient memory loss.”

“Yes. But I *can* answer your question, Mr. Nichto. Someone rescued me from the palace, you see. And he raised me. His name was Treze Bain.”

“!”

Warren’s eyes, locked on Fiona for some time, turned to dinner plates. He mumbled,

“Dr. Bain…”

Fiona continued.

“Very few people would know. Treze Bain was a doctor who visited the palace once every few days to assist the royal physician. When the fire broke out at the palace, I was rescued by the doctor, who happened to have hurried in that day. He took me to his home in the countryside. I heard from him later that I was on the verge of death for days. There were rumors back then… rumors that the fire was no accident. And the doctor also felt sympathy for me, left without memories or a family. He kept me safe in his home, telling the other villagers that I was his granddaughter who used to live in the capital. For ten peaceful years, I grew up as a normal village girl—as Dr. Bain’s granddaughter. But this past summer, he passed away of an illness. And just before he passed, he told me everything.”

Fiona’s voice rang across the dumbstruck streets.

“I thought about it for a long time. Was there any meaning to coming forward as the princess now, even though I’d lost my memories? Should I reveal the truth? That was when, yesterday, I met Major Carr Benedict, the Hero of the Mural. I asked him how he felt when he decided to make the announcement that would change the world. And this is what he said to me: ‘No matter what may happen, the truth must be told. I am certain of my belief’. So I decided to do the same, and received his help.”

As she continued circling the air, Allison asked Wil,

<What’s happening, do you think?>

<I’m not sure. Let’s just listen for now.>

“Interesting.” Said Nichto. “The circumstances seem plausible. But so were the stories of everyone else who attempted to defraud Ikstova. And I hesitate to say this, but it is also an excellent strategy for a potential liar to bring forward a celebrity like Major Carr to make themselves seem more believable—”

“So you want proof, Mr. Nichto?”

“Yes. By all means, if you can produce any. If not, I ask that you stop insulting the royal family further and leave our presence immediately.”

Fiona glanced at Benedict. He nodded slowly.

Reaching into her clothes, Fiona pulled out a gold necklace. Hanging on the golden chain was a small coin.

Holding out the pendant over her chest, Fiona used Nichto's own words:

"No citizen of Ikstova would be ignorant of what this means, don't you agree?"

<Oh… A pendant. The woman claiming to be Princess Francesca has pulled out a pendant… yes. It's a necklace with a small coin on it. It's difficult to see from here, but… It can't be…>

The newscaster suddenly went silent.

<C'mon, do your job! We can't see a thing from here!> Allison complained.

Instead of the newscaster, however, Fiona's voice came from the speakers.

<Let me repeat myself. No citizen of Ikstova would be ignorant of what this means.>

"Yes. This is proof of my royal descent. My own crest. Dr. Bain returned this to me before he passed away. Is this good enough for you?"

Nichto shook his head and replied peremptorily.

"If you don't mind, please show me the pendant. You might be bluffing with a piece of metal you found at a souvenir stand."

"You're a funny man, Mr. Nichto. Only in death does a member of the Royal Family allow the pendant to leave their possession. I'm sure you know that well. Not only that, how would *you* be able to judge my legitimacy?" Fiona asked, taking her fingers off the coin. Nichto pulled back his hand, unable to hide his irritation.

"Of course. You're right. But unless someone comes forward who can verify your claim, you are still a liar and a fraud. Don't you agree?"

"Of course. For once, we're in agreement."

"Then let's not waste any more time here. We'll search for someone who can prove the legitimacy of your pendant and make an official announcement at a later date. Although, obviously, it will be determined a detailed fake." Nichto said, his tone speeding up.

"Why are you that anxious?" Benedict asked calmly, taking the microphone. Nichto shot him a glare. But Benedict spoke to the crowd nonetheless.

"Everyone. The big reason I carried Her Highness Princess Francesca here today is this pendant. If someone can proof that this pendant is real, please come over here to this place."

There was a moment of silence. Some among the crowd exchanged glances, but no one stepped forward.

“Please.” Benedict whispered in Bezelese. Then, he spoke into the microphone in Roxchean.

“Is there no one?”

“Did you really expect to so easily find someone qualified to make that decision? Frankly, this performance of yours is incredibly upsetting, Major. If you’ll excuse me, please do as you like.” Nichto spat.

“Do you have no curiosity? This person may be Her Highness, Mr. Nichto.” Benedict asked.

“This is a waste of time, Major Carr. You are being deceived.”

“We do not know yet. Maybe someone will run to this place because they hear the radio.”

“Then please feel free to wait here as long as it takes. Until night really comes, if necessary.”

“There is no need!” Someone—not Benedict, and not Fiona—cried.

<Who’s that?>

<I don’t know…>

It was Captain Warren.

Before anyone realized, he had come up to the middle of the balcony. As the crowd and the three people watched, Warren quietly bowed to Fiona, far enough from her that his hat would not brush against her.

“What is this, Captain?” Asked Nichto. Warren turned to Fiona and the crowd, ignoring him.

“Until that day ten years ago, I, Rein Warren, was posted at the palace as a member of the royal guard. And just once, not long after I joined the guard, I played with five-year-old Princess Francesca when she was out in the gardens.”

<Awesome, Captain! We have a witness!> Allison cheered, punching the air.

“But… if this doesn’t work…” Wil muttered without holding down the call button.

“I felt something strangely familiar when I first saw you today. I didn’t know what it was at the time. But now I realize—that old memory of mine was coming back to me. There is so much of the Princess’s face in yours.”

Warren continued.

“I still can’t say for certain who you are. And I suppose you wouldn’t remember me, either. But please. Give me a chance to see for myself. Give me a chance to confirm the legitimacy of your pendant. The crest that belongs solely to Her Highness Princess Francesca—the crest that she showed me as she played that day. I believe my two eyes are still good enough to judge.”

Fiona nodded.

"Wait!" Nichto cried. "Wait, Captain Warren. I've known you for several years now, but this is the first you've said anything about having been part of the royal guard. I've never even heard rumors of such things. It pains me to suspect an honest officer like you, but could you perhaps be in cahoots with this woman?"

Warren turned. He replied quietly, not a hint of emotion rising to his face.

"Of course you wouldn't know, Mr. Nichto. After all, I never told a soul. Me, and the other members of the royal guard who survived that day… none of us revealed ourselves after the incident. How could we, having failed to protect the Royal Family? But I assure you that I am telling the truth. If you'll visit the National Library later—though the documents are restricted—you'll find all the employment records of the royal guard and its members up to ten years ago. You'll find my name there are well. If not, I will gladly ask you to take my life."

"…"

Nichto looked like he had swallowed a bug. Benedict spoke up.

"Thank you for the brave action. Then, we are asking you, Captain Warren."

Warren nodded and pulled off his hat. His short, clean-cut hair emerged in the light.

Fiona took out her pendant and raised it to eye-level.

With his hat under his left arm, Warren put his right hand over his chest and slowly knelt. And he carefully examined the little gold coin before him.

There was an intricate crest on the coin.

Beyond the coin, Warren could see Fiona's eyes—and Fiona also could see Warren's wide eyes beyond the coin.

Then, Fiona gently flipped over the coin.

The intricate image carved there was a flower with long petals, bowing to the lower left.

"Don't worry, Captain. I assure you, that's the real deal." Benedict mumbled under his breath.

<Well… a police officer, Captain Warren, has stepped up to examine the crest. Oh! He's looking at it now.> The newscaster said quietly.

<We know that already! Well, Captain? What's the diagnosis?> Allison pleaded from the cockpit.

The captain's voice finally emerged from the radio.

<The royal crest, and the flower bowing to the lower left—the crest of Her Highness Princess Francesca—I can say for certain. This is the very pendant I saw that day, all those years ago. This pendant is legitimate. It is no replica.>

It was followed by the cheers of the crowd.

<Yeah!> Allison joined in the triumph. She did a barrel roll. So did Wil's head.

Looking straight ahead as though that never happened, Wil's eyes widened.

"How…?" He mumbled to himself.

As hurrahs filled the rally, Warren said no more and gracefully stepped away from Fiona. He carefully fixed his hat and bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Captain Warren."

Warren raised his head; and without meeting Fiona's eyes, he quietly stepped aside. He turned to his right and returned to the back of the balcony.

Fiona took the microphone and spoke to the crowds.

"And to the citizens of Ikstova—I, Francesca, am deeply grateful to you all."

There was an ear-splitting cheer, accompanied by the occasional shouts of 'Princess Francesca!'.

Fiona passed the microphone to Benedict.

"What do you think, everyone? Now you understand why I, Carr Benedict came to this place today?" He asked, gesticulating dramatically. The crowd cheered once more.

Then, Benedict turned to Nichto, who was standing blankly.

"I understand why you said that Her Highness is a fraud, Mr. Nichto. Certainly, until before, it can't be helped that you did not believe in us. But what do you think now?"

All eyes were on Nichto. He smiled. With a shake of the head, Nichto went up to the microphone and spoke so everyone could hear.

"You win, Major Carr." He grinned. "It is incredibly likely that this woman is Her Highness Princess Francesca. And I understand that you're not a fraud with a flair for the dramatic. I made some awfully discourteous accusations against you. I take them all back. And I sincerely apologize."

"Just like a Member of Parliament, Mr. Nichto. But I was not tricked, but I like dramatics very much. Please correct that."

"Hah hah. I surrender, Major." Nichto chuckled. With an optimistic evaluation, he looked rather elegant. Less optimistically, he looked irritating. He offered Benedict a handshake. Benedict took it. The crowd finally broke the silence with a round of applause.

Nichto took the podium and spoke.

“I will take my leave now and hand over the podium before I’m embarrassed any further. Apologies to anyone who’s come to listen to me speak, but I’ve spoken more than my share today.”

As the crowd burst into laughter, Nichto waved his hand to the cheers of his supporters. Then, he gave Fiona a deferential bow, gave the politicians a friendly nod, and walked over to the side of the balcony.

Benedict took his eyes off Nichto. He turned to Fiona and nodded, satisfied.

“Mr. Nichto.” Benedict said suddenly. Nichto turned.

“You forgot this.” Benedict said, holding out his right hand. There was a small golden object in his fingers.

“Hm?”

It was a golden cufflink shaped like a rhombus. There was a beautiful crest engraved intricately upon it.

Nichto looked down at his left sleeve. There was an identical cufflink. Then, he looked down at his right.

“What?”

Realizing that both cufflinks were still there, Nichto frowned.

Fiona stared silently.

“This is your cufflinks, yes? Mr. Nichto. This is a precious thing that has your family crest drawing on it. It would be troublesome if you lose it.” Benedict said.

“Yes, that is mine… but where did you find it?” Nichto asked, reaching for the cufflink.

But just as his fingers drew near, Benedict quickly pulled his hand away. Nichto caught nothing but thin air.

“…?”

“I am kidding.” Benedict said jovially. Nichto struggled to hide his irritation.

Benedict turned and handed the cufflink to Fiona. Nichto turned to her.

“…”

Her gaze on him was icy.

Clasping her right hand over the cufflink, she closed her eyes. She brought her hand up to her chest, over the pendant.

Soon, she opened her eyes and spoke.

“This cufflink will not be returned to you until you’ve left prison, Owen Nichto, dead or alive.”

Her frigid voice carried to the ears of those nearby, and to those far away through the microphone.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about…”

Nichto’s voice as well.

“I accuse you of murder and assault. You’re going to prison, Owen Nichto.”

The crowd fell silent in a moment of terrible calm.

“Ten years ago, you committed murder. My mother, my father, and countless servants… do you understand what I’m saying? Of course you do. Yes. After all, you’re one of the people who stormed the palace that night.”

Like a swarm of insects squirming as one, the crowd gasped. The eyes of all gathered there —the politicians and delegates on the balcony, the police officers, and the crowd—all were on Fiona and Nichto. Only the little boy from before was still swinging his legs, completely uninterested in the unfolding conspiracy.

“Wh, what do you—”

“You’re going to ask me for proof again? It’s right here in my hand. This cufflink is yours. It’s also the only thing I managed to take from the palace that night, other than my pendant.”

“…”

“Dr. Bain gave me this cufflink when he returned my pendant. He told me that I was clutching onto this desperately in spite of my injuries. He must not have known what it was. But the moment I received it, some of my memories came back to me. I remembered that I got a hold of this cufflink in the past, when something horrible happened to me. And when I saw this poster from your election campaign, I saw this cufflink—the same one you’re wearing now. This is proof that you were on the scene, and proof that the fire was no accident. You must have assumed that the cufflink you lost melted in the fire.”

Nichto gaped on the silent balcony, lost for words. He could not manage to speak.

Benedict spoke up.

“Mr. Nichto. Now do you understand the reason why we picked this place for Her Highness’s presentation? I told you before. I like dramatics.”

“…”

“What is the matter? What do you wish to say?”

Nichto answered quietly, calmly.

“Many things. But I suppose anything will sound like an excuse if I say it here and now.”

“I suppose so.”

“So I have nothing to say. But your companion has just made an accusation against me, correct?”

“Yes. You are correct.” Benedict replied.

“In other words, I will stand trial. I will hire a lawyer to speak on my behalf and answer you properly, with legitimate evidence. I will prove that I had nothing to do with that tragic incident. Which will the people trust, I wonder? A cufflink someone might have picked up anywhere? Or the testimony of trustworthy witnesses who will prove that I was not at the scene of the crime?”

“Please do as you wish. But do not forget that the real Highness and me, the Hero of the Mural, are going to fight with you until the end. Our evidences are this pendant, and the cufflink with a drawing of your family crest. The cufflink that only you can own. I hope you have many friends who can continue lying with a story that will be revealed to be fake one day.”

Nichto snorted and turned, heading to the right side of the balcony.

“Please take care of him, Captain Warren. We will go soon also.”

Captain Warren nodded and stood before Nichto as he approached.

“This way, Mr. Nichto. I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us immediately.”

“Captain. Do you honestly believe that woman and her impossible claims?”

“I believe that she is Princess Francesca. And I believe in what she says.”

Nichto looked disgusted.

“Of course. You really were telling the truth about having been part of the royal guard. Honest and stubborn to a fault.”

“I told you earlier. If I’ve lied, you may take my life.”

Nichto stood next to Warren. Warren stepped forward to arrest him.

“Yes. You did. But even if you’re telling the truth—”

At that moment, Nichto tackled Warren with his shoulder.

“Ugh!”

Warren fell forward at the sudden attack. Nichto reached for the ceremonial dagger sheathed at Warren’s side. He pulled it out, and a twenty-centimeter blade came unknotted into Nichto’s hand.

“—I’ll be taking you life anyway!”

As Warren lay on the floor, Nichto pierced his gut without a moment’s hesitation.

"Shit!" Benedict swore in Bezelese.

Warren had quickly covered his stomach with his arm, but the dagger went straight through his arm and into his side. Blood spilled a crimson red on the balcony.

"…Urgh…"

"Impressive, Captain!" Said Nichto, pulling out the dagger. Blood spilled from Warren's side as well, staining his uniform. Nichto stepped down on his face and kicked him in the head, knocking him out. Then he began running.

He was not headed for the side exit—the spiral staircase leading down—instead, he charged at the guest seats in front of it. Nichto ran toward the people sitting there, who were mostly watching in horror without any idea what to do. He quickly tackled a young woman in one of the chairs. She fell to the floor, chair and all, and did not move.

"…"

Right before Nichto's eyes was a young boy, looking up at him absently.

For some time, all that came out of the radio were screams and angry howls.

<Hey! Newscaster! What's going on here?!> Allison demanded.

And as if on cue, the newscaster's voice returned to the foreground of the screams.

<E-everyone! Mr. Nichto has just stabbed Captain Warren!>

"What?!"

"!"

<He's grabbed a young boy who—no! He's choking him from behind with his left hand! The boy seems to be in pain! How could this happen?>

Women shrieked as they fled the balcony. The one who was knocked to the ground was pulled away by a nearby officer. Most of the politicians also ran.

"N-Nichto—" One of the politicians said, trying to talk him down, but Nichto shot him an icy glare. The politician backed away silently, before finally turning tail.

The boy was frozen, still not understanding what was happening. Nichto pulled him up by the underarm with his left hand. In his right hand was the bloodstained dagger.

He kicked a chair aside. The chair flew through the air and hit the balcony, breaking loudly for the microphone.

The newscaster alone remained on the side of the balcony, continuing the broadcast.

"Mr. Nichto is holding the boy hostage as he approaches Major Carr and Princess Francesca! It seems like… he's saying something to them! I'll raise the microphone's sensitivity."

With the child still under his arm, Nichto shook off the blood from his right hand and stepped closer to Benedict and Fiona, who were at the center of the balcony. His calm facade was nowhere to be seen now; his slicked-back hair was a mess, and hostility was clear in his eyes.

"I suppose I should have known." Fiona said, glaring.

Benedict glanced at Captain Warren, who was fallen on the floor. A younger officer went over to give him first aid treatment, and Warren slowly raised his head.

"Mr. Nichto, you are the worst human. Not only the crime you did ten years ago, but the crime you are doing now will pay for certain." Benedict warned, turning his gaze to the side of the balcony. Several police officers holding truncheons were glaring at Nichto.

"I'll have to decline. You officers over there. Don't take a single step. Or do you not care what happens to this innocent child?" Nichto threatened, sliding the tip of the knife against the boy's cheek. His face was smeared with Warren's blood.

Fiona took a step forward. Benedict tried to stop her, but she calmly pushed his arm aside.

<Let the boy go, Owen Nichto.>

<Don't make me laugh, you half-dead witch.>

<You took me hostage all those years ago… in that very same way.>

Allison was indignant.

<That bastard!>

<…>

They watched from the aeroplane circling overhead. The balcony was a tiny dot below.

"So you *do* remember. Yes. The queen and her husband both crawled out of their hiding-holes to save you, and I shot them both. They were perfect targets. But I seem to recall putting two bullets into your skull right afterwards." Nichto laughed. Fiona shot him a furious glare.

"Both of you, get out of my way. Or this boy loses his ear."

Benedict pulled Fiona away by the shoulders to the side of the balcony. Nichto walked up to the center of the balcony, which jutted out over the street. Over the railings he could see the crowd watching in transfixed silence. And in the midst of the crowd, an aeroplane.

With the railing behind him, Nichto held the boy at knifepoint.

"I'm going to take my leave. Conveniently enough, there happens to be an aeroplane right here in front of me. I'll be taking it. And I'll be asking the Hero of the Mural to pilot it for me. I'm sure that craft can seat three."

“And what if I refuse you?” Benedict asked. Nichto answered immediately.

“Then this nameless boy goes down in history as a martyr. His life being on the princess’s head, of course.”

“I understand.” Benedict replied coldly. And he laughed. “I understand, Mr. Nichto. I will be your hostage and your pilot. I do not wish to fly an aeroplane beside a man, but, well, this is not the time to be saying things like it.”

There was an incredulous look on Fiona’s face. Benedict met her gaze.

“This cannot be helped. The life of the hostage is the most important thing.”

Then, he turned to Nichto.

“If I wish to fly the aeroplane, I must prepare the aeroplane. Will you wait here? Or will you wait with the other people on the street there?”

“I’ll stay here. Work quickly now, Major.”

“Very good.”

Benedict turned to Fiona.

“Keep your eyes on him from this place.”

“What…?”

Benedict began walking away. He looked back at Fiona, winked at her, and went off to the right side of the balcony.

“I’m glad the man knows to listen to reason. But what a fool. Is he really a hero?” Nichto sneered. Fiona shot him another glare.

“If he heard you, he would be wondering by now if he should be happy or sad.”

There were several officers remaining on the right side of the balcony. One of them was Warren, who vehemently refused to be moved as he was treated where he lay.

Suddenly, he glimpsed Benedict walking in his direction. Warren weakly sat up.

“Major… you can’t let that bastard get away…”

“Please do not try too much.” Benedict replied. One of the officers came up to him stubbornly.

“Are you really going to let him get away with this, Major?”

“No.” Benedict replied sharply. He turned to the young officer at the radio who was desperately calling for backup from the distant police station.

“Please move beside.”

“What? Whoa!”

Benedict took the officer’s headset, pushed his chair aside, and took the microphone. Then, he reached over to the transmitter and changed frequencies.

<This is Benedict. Allison, do you copy? I’m on the ground, using the police force’s radio.>

Allison replied immediately in Bezelese.

<Yes, I hear you. Things must be getting dicey down there.>

With the microphone in hand Benedict looked out at the middle of the balcony. Nichto stood leaning against the railing, and the boy was limp at his side. And a little ahead of Nichto, Fiona, who was probably still staring a hole through him.

<I need your help. Both of you. We have to stop this guy.>

<All right. Wil?>

<R-right. What do we do?>

Both Allison and Wil answered. Benedict pressed the call button.

<He’s standing at the edge of the balcony now, holding a little boy hostage. Shoot him in the back from midair. The two of you will snipe him together.>

Wil gaped incredulously from his seat. Allison sounded enthusiastic.

<All right! Just leave it to me. I’m no good at aiming by hand, but I can do it from an aeroplane. I just have to shoot him down with this craft, right?>

<No. That craft is equipped with a 20mm machine gun. You want to turn the balcony into a beehive?>

<Tch.>

Allison’s pout carried over Benedict’s astonished voice.

<It’s up to you, Wil.>

<…How?>

<Just like before. You have to shoot him from midair.>

<What? But—>

<I’ll distract him starting now, so Allison—you descend just low enough to reach the balcony, and bank to the side as you cross the street. That’s when Wil will shoot him.>

<But that’s too dangerous! What if I shoot the hostage, or you?>

<Don’t worry about the hostage. The bastard’s own body will be enough of a shield. Those rounds you have won’t penetrate that far. And I’m ready to lose an arm and a leg if necessary.>

<I…>

<You can do it. Sixth place at Kaashi, you said. You and Allison are the only ones I can count on now. And just one more thing—we’ve got a lot of questions for this guy, so try to keep him alive if possible.>

Three seconds passed before Allison finally broke the silence.

<I’ll do it. We’ve come all this way, so we might as well.>

<Good. And you, Wil? Could you lend us your strength, just like you did when you saved us and the mural?>

<…Yes. I’ll do it.>

<Thank you. Open fire in exactly sixty seconds. Are both of you ready?>

Soon, he received their answers. As the officers watched, Benedict nodded, satisfied.

<Then we’ll synchronize our watches. 3, 2, 1, now.>

Benedict pressed the knob on his wristwatch. The stopwatch hand on the 12 began ticking.

<Easy, Wil. We still have 55 seconds.>

As Allison calmed him down, Wil quickly got to work. The aeroplane was turning rapidly like a hunter having located its prey, and was descending. He could feel the pressure on his body. First, Wil took off his gloves.

Taking out the handgun from the bag between his feet, he attached the stock without getting it confused this time. Then, he tried to take out the box of ammunition from the inside of the bag, but fumbled.

<We still have time.> Allison said lazily, as though having read his mind. This time, Wil succeeded. He opened the lid.

“Is everything set?” Nichto asked as Benedict returned to the balcony. The dazed child was under Nichto’s left arm, his feet above the floor.

Fiona came up to Benedict. Benedict spoke to her.

“You must go beside. It’s dangerous.”

“But—”

“Captain Warren is calling you. Leave this problem to me from now on.”

Giving Fiona a gentle push, Benedict looked down at the watch on his left wrist.

<We're getting into position, Wil.> Allison said, her tone still laid-back. The aeroplane was cruising just over the houses. Blue and white roofs passed by them, close enough to touch. Their destination was the large building ahead.

The handgun on Wil's lap was empty, the slide fully lowered.

<He's going to be on our left. I'll tilt over and slow down as much as I can.> Allison said, looking at the built-in clock. She returned the throttle lever to starting position, and the engine grew significantly quieter.

<If I don't make the first shot, how much time do I have for another?>

<You won't. It's all-or-nothing. 25 seconds left.>

<All right.>

In Wil's right hand was a single bullet. He loaded it into the magazine and inserted it into the gun. There was a dull shine to the round as it glinted through the hole in the slide.

Wil held the gun against the left side of the fuselage. He lowered the slide stop with his thumb. The slide swallowed the bullet with a metallic noise.

<Ready.>

<All right! Take it easy, now.>

Wil put the stock against his shoulder.

"Just one shot."

"Well, Major. If you'll lead the way." Said Nichto, raising the dagger in his hand.

"Saying that." Benedict said, crossing his arms. The second hand on his left wrist passed the 40-second mark.

"I will stop after all. I think that if I carry a garbage like you, I will also become unlucky."

45 seconds.

"What…?"

Benedict slowly approached Nichto, his expression inscrutable. Surprised by his actions, Nichto pulled the boy in front of him. 50 seconds.

"I am saying that I will not leave a villain like you, you garbage."

55 seconds. Benedict took another step.

"Bastard!"

Nichto stopped short of pointing the dagger at the boy's neck, and instead held it out toward Benedict, who had walked right up to him without a hint of fear. He then raised his arm to attack.

<5… 4…>

Allison was counting down.

The scenery was flowing from right to left. Formless roofs suddenly gave way to a gigantic theater. Soon, the world turned as though they were riding on a rotating plate. And the balcony came into view.

<3… 2… 1…>

From behind the tilted wing, Wil saw the two men. The back of the man standing before the railings, and just beyond him in a near-match of silhouettes, the confident Benedict.

The gun was pointed at both men.

<Now!>

Wil pulled the trigger.

60.

Out of nowhere came the roar of an engine.

Over the head of the man lunging to stab him, Benedict glimpsed the fighter craft carrying Allison and Wil. On the side of the fuselage was the crest of the beacon. The gun at the back seat was pointed in his direction.

Benedict did not try to move.

"I'm counting on you."

A golden shell casing shot up from the gun.

"Argh!"

Nichto gasped in pain. At the same time, the fighter craft rushed by like a gust of wind, disappearing into the sky. Blood spouted from Nichto's left shoulder. He writhed in pain and wildly swung the dagger. The blade cut thin air.

"Excellent!" Benedict cried, and tackled Nichto with his left shoulder. Then, he quickly pulled over the child with his right arm.

"I'm sorry."

Immediately, he pushed the child to the ground. The boy fell on his back.

"You bastard!" Nichto roared. His face contorted as he swung the dagger at Benedict's neck.

"Take this!"

With a glare, Benedict raised his left hand as though covering his neck. He held his right hand behind it like a support.

Crush.

There was a dull sound as the dagger came to a stop. The tip of the blade was lodged in Benedict's wrist by a scant few millimeters.

"What… is this…?" Nichto hissed.

"It is very expensive." Benedict replied in Roxchean.

The dagger had shattered the glass pane of the wristwatch on Benedict's left hand, destroying the face of the watch and coming to a stop inside the clockwork.

Benedict swung his left arm. The dagger flew into the air and fell to the floor with a loud noise.

Nichto stood in a daze. Benedict clenched his right fist.

"I made a promise!"

And he 'ouched' Nichto in the face.

<Oh! Major Carr has taken the hostage and—the dagger! Look out! No! It's flying off… This this is incredible!> The newscaster cried.

<What's going on down there?! Straighten up, news guy!> Allison complained as she ascended and sped up.

And,

<He's punched him! Mr. Nichto has just hit the railing and is on the floor! The boy is also safe! Major Carr's done it!>

<Yes! He did it, Wil! Isn't the major amazing?> Allison cheered. <And you, too, Wil!>

She turned. Beneath his goggles, Wil was smiling a little. In his right hand was the gun, the slide lowered all the way.

At the same time, a voice interpreting the broadcast into Bezelese filled the communications tent.

"Go, Major Carr!"

The Sou Be-Il soldiers cheered in excitement, not caring that military equipment was being damaged as they hugged and jumped around in the tiny tent.

The bespectacled captain gasped,

“That’s it! If it’s a boy, I’ll name him ‘Benedict’!”

* * *

With his hair in a mess, Nichto stood weakly against the railing with blood dripping from his mouth.

He looked up. Before him were Benedict and Fiona. Behind them, police officers glaring with truncheons at the ready. Behind them, Captain Warren, sitting in a chair with bandages around his stomach.

“Owen Nichto.”

Fiona spoke. Benedict pulled the microphone over to her.

“I accuse you of the crime of raiding the palace that night.”

“But before, you will be arrested for this crime. Please be careful that he does not run away. We will listen to his story after. I’m sorry, but I think our dinner will have to be eaten with bars between us two.” Benedict said, waving the right hand that had punched Nichto.

“!”

Nichto spat saliva and blood onto the floor. Blood flowed from his limp left hand, dying his suit a deep red.

He slowly got up. The officers moved quickly. Nichto leaned against the railing and looked out at the streets.

“…”

No one was moving. The crowd watched as though frozen. Hundreds of sets of icy eyes.

“Hmph… you have no idea how easy you have it…”

His wavering voice carried through the microphone and out of the speakers. The crowd watched silently.

“I’m just going to say one last thing: don’t even think about separating from Roxche.”

“But you say the things you wish to say until the end. Incredible.” Benedict said, honestly impressed.

Nichto looked at him, also smiling.

“This… this is all your fault. If you hadn’t made this discovery… if only you’d left it to rot…”

“This discovery was too large to hide.”

“Heh… And you, the immortal Princess Francesca…”

"…"

Fiona met Nichto's gaze. This time, not with a glare, but with pity.

"I… I have two requests."

"For now, I'll listen to what you have to say."

Nichto's weak voice rode the airwaves and reached Allison and Wil.

<One… do not hold my family accountable. My wife, my daughter… they had nothing to do with my actions. They don't know what I did.>

Fiona's voice replied.

<That's a rather tall order coming from the man who shot my family. But I will promise you as the princess of this country, Owen Nichto. Everyone here will serve as witness.>

<I'm… grateful…>

The green aeroplane continued to circle the city overhead.

"And the second request?"

Nichto smiled. With an optimistic evaluation, he looked rather irritating. Less optimistically, he looked elegant.

"Go to hell… Princess Francesca."

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline. Is there anything else?"

"Heh… heh…"

Nichto put his right hand on top of the railing. He pulled himself onto the ledge.

"Goodbye."

His smile twisted into a smirk.

"Shit!" Benedict swore in Bezelese, lunging forward.

Nichto's body leaned back. Fiona gasped. Benedict reached his right arm to Nichto, not with a fist, but with an open hand. He caught nothing but thin air.

There was the sound of the gasping crowd.

Nichto's body disappeared from the balcony.

Then came the sound of a person falling head-first onto a stone-paved street from a third-story building.

Chapter 8: Conversations and Letters

It was a luxurious room.

The sun's rays illuminated the thick carpet and the intricately-designed furniture. A beautiful painting decorated the wall. Next to it was a large bouquet. Further inside the large room was a door leading into another room.

"…"

Wilhelm Schultz gaped at the hotel room he was led into. The moment he opened the door and took a single step inside, he had found himself rooted to the spot. He was in his sweater, with his coat hanging from his arm.

"Come in."

In the very middle of the room was a round table with ornate carvings. Standing next to it was Fiona. She wore a white blouse and a navy skirt. Over her chest shone a golden pendant.

"Er… excuse me."

Wil slowly stepped forward. On either side he was accompanied by men in red clothes, similar to the police uniforms. Fiona addressed the two royal guards.

"Would it be all right if you gave us some time alone?"

The guards exchanged glances.

"Your Highness…"

"This is my friend—he helped me out back in the village. He's also a friend of Major Carr's. We'll be all right. I'll ask for some tea later, so would it be all right if you left us for a bit?"

"Of course, Your Highness. And please, we're happy to honor your requests. If you'll excuse us."

The guards bowed respectfully, left the room, and quietly shut the door. Unable to hide his anxiety, Wil stepped up to the table.

"Take a seat, Wil. You can put your coat on the empty chair."

Wil did as Fiona suggested and hung his coat on the back of a chair. It slid down once, so he had to pick it up again. Then, he finally sat facing Fiona.

Fiona looked him in the eye.

"Thank you so much, Wil. I wanted to thank both you and Allison in person. Major Carr told me that she's left already… but I'm glad I could at least see you like this."

"It was no problem, Your Highness Princess Francesca." Wil replied.

"Please, call me Fi. I wanted to tell you that, too. And thank you again, Wil."

"Not at all, Fi."

They laughed quietly.

Wil spoke.

"I'll be leaving this country tonight as well. I'm really glad we had the chance to meet like this."

"What happened to you and Allison afterwards? I was so worried… about both the aeroplane and your school trip. Was everything all right?"

Wil gave a wry chuckle and answered Fiona's questions.

"After the commotion, we went back to the Mushke area and landed on the lake. We left the aeroplane there and headed into the city. We sent an anonymous radio call to the encampment just before we ran, and we saw a truck rushing over soon after. Then, we got the car back at the post office in Mushke…"

Wil caught the shadow flitting by Fiona's eyes. But pretending not to notice, he continued.

"Then, Allison suggested going for tea downtown. But unfortunately…"

"Did something happen?"

"We ran right into my classmates, who were on their way back from visiting Slankalans. Allison had no choice but to run, and I got on the bus with my friends. Allison left by aeroplane the next day—two days ago."

"I see… I'm sorry. This is my fault." Fiona said, crestfallen. "I suppose I'll have to apologize to Allison later."

"Not at all. Allison really enjoyed everything, I think. She said in the aeroplane, 'It's amazing that we get to help the princess'."

This time, Wil failed to catch the shadow flitting by Fiona's eyes. He smiled.

Fiona shrugged and changed the subject.

"And what about you? Did you get into trouble?"

"Yes. But…"

"But?"

"Everyone—the teachers, the students—was so distracted by the news that Princess Francesca was alive that I just had to write a few pages reflecting on my actions. And to be perfectly honest, I don't regret what I did one bit. I'm very happy that I got to experience what I did."

"I see." Fiona smiled as Wil laughed.

And,

“You’re not Princess Francesca.” Wil said. Fiona stared at the brown-haired boy before her.

“You’re someone else. After all, Princess Francesca, though brought to the village by Dr. Bain, passed away ten years ago.” Wil continued. Fiona’s tone grew solemn.

“Did… did Major Carr tell you that?”

Wil shook his head.

“Two days ago, I received a phone call from Benedict while I was at the hotel. He wanted to thank me for the successful shot just before he left. He told me that he managed to take care of the aeroplane issue, and that his rank remained unchanged. And finally, he talked about you. ‘I want you two to simply rejoice at the fact that Princess Francesca has come back to life’, he said. That was all.”

“I see…” Fiona whispered, hanging her head. Wil closed his eyes.

A moment passed in silence. Wil opened his eyes.

“You’re not Princess Francesca. But you *are* a true princess. You’re twins, aren’t you?”

“!”

Fiona looked up.

“You and Princess Francesca were twins. But because royal tradition only allows for one child to be recognized, you could not become a princess. You were entrusted to that village, raised as the granddaughter of Dr. Bain. Am I correct?”

Fiona’s eyes were wide. She shook her head.

“I can’t believe it…”

Then, she smiled and nodded.

“Yes, that’s right. I’m not Francesca. I’m her younger twin, Fiona. But how did you know?”

There wasn’t a hint of irritation in Fiona’s tone. Wil thought for a moment before answering.

“I have several reasons to think so. First, Captain Warren mentioned that you resemble the young Princess Francesca. That would have been rather unlikely if you and the princess were total strangers. And again, if you were strangers, you wouldn’t have been so desperate. But if you were trying to avenge your family, your actions make a great deal of sense. Also, your pendant was a big hint.”

“This?”

Fiona picked up the coin hanging over her chest. First, she examined the royal crest. Then, she flipped it over and examined the flower bowing to the left.

“The crest?”

“Yes. Princess Francesca’s crest. Do you know the name of that flower?”

"No. Do you?" Fiona asked, curious.

"I looked into the flower after the incident. I managed to find it in an illustrated guide our biology teacher brought from the school. It's called the Linnaea—it's a very small plant that grows at high altitudes."

"I know the names of almost every plant there is, but… 'Linnaea'… I've never heard of it."

"That's not surprising. The Linnaea is not native to this country. It's not a plant known to many Roxcheans, since it grows mostly in the coniferous forests and highlands of Sou Be-Il. And even fewer would know about it in Iks."

"I see… but how did the flower's name tip you off?" Fiona asked.

"Its shape."

"?"

"The flowers only bloom in sets of two. The stem splits and grows into two flowers, each pointing in a different direction. That's why, in Bezelese, they're known by another name —'Twinflower'."

"…"

"I don't know who might have thought up this crest for you. But Princess Francesca, the original owner of that pendant… she probably knew that there was another flower that matched hers."

"I… I see."

Fiona looked down at the little flower resting on her fingers.

"I see…"

Then, she smiled. she looked up at Wil.

"Wil?"

"Yes?"

"Major Carr knows everything—that I'm Francesca's twin, and how I got my hands on this pendant. I told him on the way to the capital. Wil—no, the true Hero of the Mural, alongside Allison."

This time, it was Wil's turn to be surprised.

"What…?"

"Major Carr told me the truth after I told him everything. That he wasn't the real hero—that you and Allison were the ones who cross the border and found the treasure. It was very fun listening to that story." Fiona said brightly. Wil was a little embarrassed.

"I see… er… please don't tell anyone, if at all possible."

"Of course. Then let's make things fair, shall we? Could you listen to my story? About how I learned the truth without Grandfather knowing, and how I came to find the pendant and the cufflink?" Fiona said, smiling. Wil nodded.

"By all means."

* * *

My oldest memory is from when I was three or four, when I was buried in a pile of snow that fell from a tree. I was crying my eyes out.

Of course, I was living in the village back then, as well. Grandfather, the elder, and all the aunties and uncles in the village. They were so kind to me.

I helped Grandfather with his clinic, learned to make medicinal herbs, cooked, and cleaned… I had a normal life. Grandfather told me that my parents had passed away in an avalanche. But I wasn't lonely or sad.

And on that fateful day… winter of ten years ago.

Grandfather went on one of his regular visits to the capital, but out of nowhere he returned by carriage at midnight, when it was still snowing. That had never happened before, so I was very surprised.

"We have an emergency patient."

That was what Grandfather said. I'd never seen him look so desperate and angry in all my life.

He told me to stay in my room, and took the patient to the treatment room. Then, he told me to keep the fire going in the fireplace, and to have boiled water on hand so he could use it anytime, and locked himself up in the treatment room. All day long.

"I'm all right."

That was what he said each time I asked if he was okay. Several times afterwards, he asked me for more boiling water and fresh bandages. I still remember clearly making his meals, too.

That day, Grandfather told me to turn away all patients, no matter what. It was a very snowy day, but when a woman came to the door for her usual medicine, I just gave it to her at the door.

It was night.

I fell asleep at the fireplace, tired. When I opened my eyes, it was midnight.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Because of all the snow piled up on the ground and the full moon above, it was clear as day. It was almost blinding.

As I lit the fireplace and boiled more water, it slowly grew dark outside. I remembered then that there was going to be a Midday Night that night.

I took the boiling water into the treatment room.

"Grandfather?"

I often went into the room to help look after patients, so I did the same then as well.

In the room was a single bed, and a table covered with bloodstained bandages. Grandfather was sitting in a chair next to it, sleeping. He looked exhausted.

I put a blanket over Grandfather and went to check on the patient like I usually did. I thought that, if something had happened to the patient, I should do something. That I should wake Grandfather, if necessary.

The world was filled with pale moonlight. The white sheets of the bed were blinding. She lay there.

"…"

I was shocked. There were bandages covering her face. Only her eyes, nose, and mouth were not covered. The rest, wrapped up in clean white bandages. She was young. About the same age as I was.

She was breathing quietly but steadily.

She seemed to be asleep, so I turned to leave. But at that moment,

"Who…"

Someone suddenly spoke. I flinched. I looked around, not knowing who it was. But I finally realized that it was her voice. I walked up to the bed. She turned her head and looked at me.

"Who… are you…?"

A weak voice escaped her lips. It was a girl's voice. I had never heard the voice before, but I thought it was beautiful and clear.

"I'm Fiona. But everyone calls me Fi."

"Fi… I'm so happy to meet you. I really am." She said.

I didn't know why she was saying such things, but I answered, wanting to hear more of her wonderful voice.

"Thank you."

The Midday Night passed by in silence. I was just about to turn on a lamp.

"Fi… talk with me."

She said suddenly. Patients often said things like that. That they were bored and wanted someone to talk to them. But because I didn't know if she was all right to speak, I asked,

"I don't mind, but are you all right to talk? Doesn't it hurt?"

"It's okay if I just listen… Please, Fi. Tell me about you. Tell me as much as you can."

So like I usually did, I pulled a chair over to the bedside. In the dimming world, I talked about myself.

How I had lived in the village all my life. How the villagers were very kind and taught me many things. How they were all very happy whenever I learned something new. How I had no parents, but wasn't lonely thanks to the villagers.

She smiled at points along the way, so I continued. Grandfather did not wake. I wanted to let him rest, if even a little longer.

Even as we spoke, the moon slowly disappeared from the sky. It grew darker and darker. After telling her as much as I could, I asked her,

"Say, what's your name?"

She replied in her beautiful voice. That it was a secret… for now.

"You'll know one day, Fi… You'll know. Soon…"

I thought she was being strange. At the time, I didn't understand what she had meant.

It was pitch-black. I couldn't see anything in the room. The moon floated overhead, shining a dull red.

"Fi… could you do something for me?"

I asked her what she wanted. She answered,

"Take these bandages off my face."

I immediately asked her if that was all right. But, strangely, she said that her face wasn't injured at all. And she asked me again.

"All right."

In the dark, I fumbled around and unwrapped her bandages, moving her pillow. The bandages were clean, and came off easily. Sighing in relief at the fact that her face was really uninjured, I finished unwrapping the bandages.

She thanked me. But because it was so dark, I still could not see her face. 'Should I turn on the light?' I asked, but she declined.

And soon, the great shadow in the sky disappeared.

The lunar eclipse ended, and the red moon turned into a thin, white arc.

Light began returning to the room as well.

"…"

And I looked into her face.

"Hello, Fi…"

She said, meeting my gaze.

To be honest, I was confused. I was very confused. I didn't know what to say, or what to do.

I looked upon the girl who had the same face as me.

"You didn't think that she was your twin sister at the time?" Wil asked.

"Back then, not at all. I knew about twins, but I'd only ever heard about them. So I assumed that, maybe the world was full of people who resembled each other closely. And I wondered if I should point out our resemblance. In the end, I didn't."

Lying on the bed, she smiled gently.

I still remember that smile like it was yesterday. Such a soft and beautiful smile. The moment I saw it, it occurred to me that I might never be able to match such a face. I realized with all my being that the girl was different from me. She was a girl who only looked like me, but had a beautiful voice. That was her.

"Say…" She whispered. "I… I'm badly hurt. So I think I might die."

Whenever a patient said something like that, I would always say, 'Don't think like that. You're going to get better, I promise. Dr. Bain is amazing'. So that was how I answered then, too.

She smiled.

"I see… but just in case. Listen to me, just in case. Okay?"

"Okay. But only just in case."

"Thank you, Fi. You see… someone did this to me."

"What? Who? Who could do something so horrible?"

"But… you're safe. You weren't hurt. I'm jealous."

"?"

"If I die… will I go to sleep in this village, do you think? I will, won't I?"

I nodded.

"Then… Fi? Could I leave my body to you? Please. Promise?"

"…All right. I promise, just in case. But—"

I was going to say that such a thing wouldn't happen. But,

"Thank you, Fi. That was all I wanted to ask."

"No problem. But you're going to get better, okay?"

"Okay… then… please put the bandages back on my face."

I agreed and did as she asked. She thanked me again, and I replied, 'Don't mention it'. Then, I told her that I had to go and boil water and watch the fire.

"I see. Thank you for telling me about you."

"Not at all. I can tell you lots more later."

"See you again, Fi. Thank you…"

Those were the last words I ever heard from her. That beautiful voice I still remember to this day.

And so, I left the room. The living room was completely bright by then, and I fell asleep while I was watching the fireplace. Morning came.

Grandfather came out of the room, looking dejected.

He looked very sad. I asked him,

"Grandfather, what happened to the patient?"

Grandfather slowly shook his head.

The next day, Grandfather buried her in the village cemetery.

Apparently, he'd told the other villagers that she was an orphan he had been treating in the capital, and that that was why he brought her there to be buried. Everything was covered up.

In any event, the entire village was in an uproar that day—the rumors floating around since the day before had been proven true. The royal palace had burned to the ground, and Queen Calensia, Sir Brown, and Princess Francesca had gone missing. Chances of their survival were dismal.

And the days went by as usual. Even I knew that the queen's family had gone from the world, but I didn't know why Grandfather's regular trips to the capital stopped completely. But I was happy that he stayed in the village all the time.

I never told anyone that I had spoken to the girl with the beautiful voice who looked like me. That memory remained a dreamlike recollection in my mind, occasionally surfacing as it grew up alongside me.

This summer, news reached even Iks and our little village that someone discovered the mural. It was just around that time that Grandfather passed away.

"I see… so that's why you didn't recognize Benedict."

"That's right. I wasn't in any state to know. Although I do feel bad about it."

"Actually, I'm sure he must have been happy."

"?"

"N-never mind. Please tell me more."

Of course, Grandfather didn't tell me the truth on his deathbed, as I claimed on the balcony. He was nothing but a loving grandfather to me until the very end.

I decided to bury him with the villagers' help.

And that was when I finally realized what the girl from ten years ago had meant.

She was sleeping in the cemetery. I retrieved her body and buried Grandfather where she had been sleeping. All alone, I began the task of polishing her remains.

That was when I found it.

"What? You mean…"

Wil was stunned. He glanced at the pendant shining over Fiona's chest.

"Of course… if it was made of gold…" He gasped. Fiona pulled up the coin into her fingers.

"Yes. It was just as clean as it is now. Do you understand what that meant?"

Wil nodded.

"Yes! I get it! Incredible… This might sound strange to say, but… to get revenge on the ones who killed her and her parents, Princess Francesca made an unbelievable decision. And she acted on it with everything she had."

"Yes."

Fiona wore a look both angry and vicious, but her face was tinted by sadness.

"I found two tiny shining objects in her remains. One was the pendant, and the other—"

"The cufflink! When Nichto took her hostage, Princess Francesca must have pulled off one of his cufflinks with her teeth. And… and she swallowed it so she could use it as evidence, along with the pendant that would prove her identity. Because even if she died, someone would find those things one day, when her body was retrieved."

Fiona slowly nodded.

"The moment I found the royal pendant and saw the crest, everything fell into place. That the girl was Princess Francesca, who supposedly died in the fire at the palace. Why Grandfather brought her to the village on the night the palace burned down. Why I saw my mirror image in the moonlight that night. And what she meant when she asked me to take care of her bones."

"…"

"And I came to a conclusion: That I was a twin, and she was my older twin Francesca. That because of the rules that allow the monarch to have only one child, I had to be entrusted to Grandfather—Dr. Bain. That Grandfather was a royal physician."

"And that conclusion turned out to be right."

"No one came out and told me, 'You've got it', but I was confident. But I couldn't solve the mystery of the cufflink until the end. I could imagine that its owner was involved with the incident, but I'd lived in the countryside all my life—I'd never seen something like that before, and I had no idea that people engraved family crests on them. And of course, I couldn't go around asking the other villagers about it, either."

"So Benedict brought you the final puzzle piece?"

"Yes. The moment I noticed the same cufflink on that poster, it occurred to me—that God must have created me to pass judgement on that man."

Wil exhaled loudly.

"The one Allison greeted in your basement that night must have been Princess Francesca. I was curious that hers was the only small skull in the room. Thank you for telling me your story."

Fiona nodded and jokingly replied,

"Although it's no match for the story about the mural."

They laughed cheerfully.

Then, Wil pointed out two problems and asked Fiona how she would deal with them. The first was that Nichto must have had allies, and the second was the problem of where Fiona would live.

"Well… I'm not sure, but it's true that there must have been other culprits. But now that Nichto is dead, it won't be easy to find the rest of them. Although Captain Warren's fired up about the investigation, even though he's still in the hospital. That's a problem we'll have to struggle with from now on."

Then, the look on Fiona's face shifted into a troubled one.

"And as for where I'll live… to be honest, I wish I could do something right now. I can't stay at a hotel like this permanently, and I don't know what to do about my expenses. But I don't want to rebuild the palace, like some people are telling me. The prime minister came to visit the other day, and asked me to try and use as little tax money as possible."

"It must be a lot to deal with."

"Yes. Do you have any suggestions?" Fiona asked jokingly. Wil's reply was immediate.

"Yes."

"Really?"

Wil looked Fiona in the eye.

"I have a good idea. Actually, that was part of the reason I came to visit you. In fact, I *had* to tell you. That's why I went so far as to rudely unravel your past."

"…"

"Will you have a listen?"

"Of course."

Fiona leaned forward in her chair, her elbows on the table. Wil spoke.

"You must live in that village—the village where your grandfather sleeps."

"I'm sorry. I can't do that." Fiona replied, crestfallen. "The villagers know better than anyone that I've lived there since I was a baby. And they know better than anyone that I'm not the real princess. I lied to the people of the country to avenge my murdered family. I chose to bury the truth to the end. There was no other way, I think. But I can't go to the villagers who loved and looked after me and ask them to play along. I couldn't."

Wil listened quietly.

"And security is going to be a problem, too. I don't want to bother that quiet village with all the commotion it's going to involve. I'm sorry for shooting down your suggestion, Wil."

Wil replied that that was all right, and added,

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

"What?"

"Nothing you told me will be a problem, Fiona. I guarantee it."

Fiona stared, bewildered. Wil continued.

"A lot of things about the village bothered me from the moment I first set foot inside. First, the fact that they fed us tea spiked with sleeping herbs. No one would go that far, even against a pair of outlanders. Not only that, the woman who happily told us how to get to the village hall and the shrewd old woman who met us there both struck me as suspicious. And now that I think about it, the reason our car got stuck must have been because they set up traps in the area."

Wil paused.

"And the barbed wires Benedict told us about, which are set up in a circle all around the village. They were much too secure to be merely for keeping animals out. Then there were the village men, who were coordinated like well-trained soldiers. Also, when you told us that you are a princess, Allison guessed that you were living in hiding. She also pointed out as we flew to the capital that the village was protected. And in the morning, she also noted that the village was full of older people. I also noticed that the age range there was skewed disproportionately to middle age and older. In addition, there were the restricted documents Captain Warren mentioned, which listed the names of all members of the royal guard."

"…"

"I saw the crests displayed in the village hall. I'm sure you've seen them as well."

"What? Yes, of course."

"The princess's crest—the Linnaea—was among them. But it was pointing to the lower right. The opposite direction from the one in the pendant. Didn't you think that was strange?"

"I heard this when I was about fifteen—apparently, one of the villagers had copied down the design from the city and made it here. But the person made a mistake, and the princess's flower was done backwards. They found out too late, so they just left it as it is."

"That's probably an excuse they made up for you. The flower wasn't reversed by accident."

"What do you mean?"

"The Linnaea that points to the right is yours. It's your crest."

"…"

"It's the other half of the Twinflower. It was your crest all along. Just like two flowers bloom on the Linnaea, each in different directions."

"So…"

"Let me get to the point. The entire village knows about you. They knew all along that you're one of the queen's twin daughters. In fact, I believe that when you were born twenty years ago, many guards and attendants must have been dispatched to the village where you were to be sent. All under the guise of average villagers. The area must have had been connected to the royal family for a long time, or maybe there was a secret villa of the royal family's there."

"…"

Fiona blinked silently. She stared at the brown-haired boy across from her as though looking at a magician.

"So things will be all right. They'll welcome you back with open arms. And they'll be proud to protect you, just as they have for the last twenty years." Wil declared.

Fiona closed her eyes. A single teardrop ran down her cheek.

A moment of silence passed. Wil spoke.

"I'd wanted to return something very important to you, but I couldn't bring it here. I'm taking very good care of it for now, so could I send it by post to that village? To your name?"

Fiona opened her teary eyes and smiled.

"Yes! By all means."

* * *

After that, Fiona looked so happy. We drank tea together for a while.

The teacup was very thin and beautiful. The saucer, too. I was afraid of what would happen if I dropped it.

After the attendant left, Fiona slowly walked over to a cabinet on the side of the room and opened it. It turned out the cabinet was actually a new model of refrigerator.

Fiona took out a bottle of strawberry jam and scooped up a heaping spoonful into her tea. I was floored.

She took a sip and started laughing, saying that it tasted strange. I tried putting jam into my tea, too. It was delicious.

I heard from Fiona that she promised to exchange letters with Benedict. It looks like she's planning to officially invite the Hero of the Mural, Defender of the Princess to the Kingdom of Ikstova later.

I also heard that, once civilians are allowed to visit Sou Be-Il, Benedict's going to invite Fiona first. I don't think that day will be too far off. He also wants both of us to come, too, and promised to send us tickets.

The four of us might be getting together for tea someday soon.

That's about all I have to say.

I wrote this before, but I just wanted to tell you again—thank you so much, Allison.

It was a really memorable trip. The best.

This letter's probably going to reach you in the beginning of the new year.

So here's my new year's greeting: Happy New Year, Allison.

Wilhelm Schultz

P.S. When we were talking about going to Sou Be-Il, Fiona said, ”Please tell Allison that I won’t get in her way next time”. I wonder what she means…?

-**To be continued in Volume III**-